ADVANCE OF Z
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TRANSLATED BY
ZEONICSCANLATIONS
UNDER THE
FLAG
OF TITANS
2

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CHAPTER.04

February 0086
Satellite Orbit Around Earth

Rumors circulated aboard the Aswan about the two Hi-Zacks that had transmitted Titans' identification signals but then engaged in hostile actions against the test team. There was no official explanation, but it was undeniable that they were insurgents.

Eliard couldn't believe it.

The Titans were an elite force. Eliard took pride in being among the chosen. He assumed the other crew did as well, at least the test team members. Carl was a bit twisted, reluctant to admit it openly, but Eliard could tell he took pride in being a Titan. Audrey and Commander Murphy were likely no different.

No, Eliard believed that all of the Aswan's crew felt the same way. That's why the existence of insurgents within their organization's ranks was so unbelievable. Where had those two Hi-Zacks gone since then? It had been confirmed that no other Titans' ships were nearby at the time.

The Aswan orbited around Confeito, sharing the orbit with Side 1 and Side 6 colonies. However, the mobile suits' payloads were insufficient to reach those colonies.

There must have been a ship somewhere, and it couldn't have been a Titans' ship.

Was the Earth Federation Forces faltering? Or was it that even the Titans weren't a monolithic organization?

Eliard felt frustrated. No one knew the answer. Moreover, Confeito was a remote region; it was difficult to assess what was happening on Earth and at other Titans' bases.

Compounding that, news about the AEUG's activities unnerved Eliard and his comrades. The AEUG was an Anti-Earth Federation government movement.

Supposedly organized to resist the oppression of the Spacenoids, the Titans officially recognized it as a radical terrorist group. Eliard knew that they had organized anti-government rallies in several colonies.

He had only thought of it as a political movement without substance, but he now realized they possessed considerable military power.

Still, they were just a terrorist group. Eliard believed they were no match for the Titans, an elite force within the regular army.

Yet, Eliard couldn't shake the feeling that the two Titans' mobile suits that had evaded the test team's restraint and escaped had something to do with the AEUG's activities.

He didn't know how they were related, but he felt something was gradually changing. Eliard sensed it in his bones.

"Galbaldy β...?"

Carl asked the mechanic Pete, "RMS-117. Isn't that the mainstay unit of the Earth Federation Forces developed at Luna II?"

"That's right."

"Why is a suit like that coming to the Aswan?"

"They want to test some enhancement parts."

Eliard, standing beside Carl, couldn't help but ask Pete.

"What kind of enhancement parts?"

"To improve mobility, they're equipping it with joints to attach boosters and the like."

"Can you be more specific?"

"You know Hazel's shield booster, right? I heard they're attaching two of those."

"Huh..."

"What I'm more curious about is..."

Pete spoke up. "A pilot's coming along with the Galbaldy β. Usually, for a test, they'd just send in the suit and leave it to you guys."

"Maybe they're attached to it?" Carl suggested. "You might not get it, but maybe the pilot doesn't want it damaged during the test."

"Hmph," Pete said. "As a mechanic, I can't understand that."

The pilot, who had finished reporting for duty, descended from the bridge to the residential block. By chance, the test team's briefing had just ended, and they met in passing.

He wore the uniform of the regular Earth Federation Space Force, not the Titans. His hair was short and golden, and his eyes were gray.

"Maxim..."

Seeing the new pilot, Commander Murphy called out to him. "So, it was you who came on the Galbaldy β?"

"Murphy, huh..."

"Let me introduce you. These are the test team members: Eliard, Carl, and Audrey. This is Maxim Gunar."

After checking the newcomer's rank insignia, Murphy introduced him. "Lieutenant Gunar of the Earth Federation Forces."

Eliard saluted. Weightlessness made it impossible to stand at attention. It was customary and permissible on a ship to salute while floating in space.

"Maxim fought alongside me during the Delaz Conflict," Murphy said.

Maxim didn't smile but replied, "I was in your debt back then."

"That's in the past."

"No, that's not what I mean. I'm talking about when I was undertaking an operation at Colony 30. I heard you guys provided rear support."

"Were you at Colony 30 too? Does that mean you were with the Titans?"

"I was with the Titans. Captain Bask's team recruited my entire squad. After various events following the operation, I was expelled from the Titans and assigned to my current mission."

Eliard had many questions. Who had shot down the civilian shuttle that was with the Zanzibar? Who had been aboard the civilian shuttle, and why was it destroyed? If they were with the Zanzibar, there was a possibility they were part of Zeon remnants or a similar force, but why had they come from Side 1?

Questions kept surfacing. Rather, they were always lurking in the back of his mind. However, no one had given him answers. The Aswan crew and those stationed at Confeito didn't know the truth.

Lieutenant Maxim Gunar, who was partaking in an operation at Colony 30, should know the truth. But the conversation about Colony 30 went no further. Lieutenant Gunar changed the subject.

"You're aware the Zeon remnants have been laying low lately?"

Murphy nodded.

"But we don't know why they're staying quiet."

"It's the AEUG."

"What does the anti-Earth Federation government movement have to do with the Zeon remnants?"

"The AEUG is no longer just an anti-Federation movement. They've acquired a significant amount of weaponry independently, and they're steadily drawing in Earth Federation Forces. There are even rumors that they involve Zeon remnants due to their shared opposition to Earthnoids."

"Zeon remnants joining forces with the AEUG?"

Lieutenant Gunar shrugged his shoulders.

"It wouldn't be strange if that were the case. The enemy of my enemy is my friend, after all."

"AEUG and Zeon remnants..."

Eliard said, "Isn't that just terrorists joining hands?"

That's how it seemed to Eliard. The ghosts of the old Zeon army and the anti-Federation movement come together. It couldn't be anything but a terrorist organization. Lieutenant Gunar looked at Eliard and smirked sarcastically.

"So, the Titans are the heroes of justice, and everyone else is just a dangerous terrorist?"

"Isn't that the truth?"

"You're a happy fella, aren'tcha?"

Lieutenant Gunar kicked off the wall, leaving the test team behind.

It was sixteen Earth hours later when the scramble order came through. First, the on-duty 2nd team went out, followed by the deployment order for the test team. An unidentified warship was on an intersect course with the Aswan, set to reach their closest point in fifteen minutes.

"Lieutenant Hunter, Hazel II, launching."

Propelled by the catapult, Eliard entered outer space. He tried to control his position while assessing the situation around him. Suddenly, the communication became chaotic.

"Who are you? Don't use the catapult without permission!"

"Who's piloting the Galbaldy β?"

Eliard flipped the Hazel II around. Something had burst out of Aswan's mobile suit deck.

The Galbaldy β... Eliard thought.

What on Earth is happening?

July 0088
Leak

"Gundam isn't just a nickname for a mobile suit," Hendrick began wistfully. "It's a symbol. For the Earth Federation Forces, it represents victory, while for the Zeon forces, it symbolizes fear and hatred. You could call it a legend."

Conrad nodded in agreement.

"A single mobile suit changed the course of the One Year War. That was the Gundam. Being a mobile suit pilot myself, I'm quite familiar with the legend."

"Various investigations have been conducted on the Gundam, but in the end, the reason it could play such a significant role in the One Year War remains a mystery. There were credible rumors that the pilot was a Newtype, but the military never officially commented on this matter. Regardless, the name 'Gundam' continues to live on as a symbol. So it's only natural that the Titans, who took control of the Earth Federation Forces, wanted to inherit this legend. I worked as a mechanic aboard the Aswan. The Aswan was affiliated with the Confeito Theater Forces, where Gundam development was also being conducted."

"I've heard that Gundams were being developed at Gryps. But I never knew it was being developed at Confeito too..."

"Their approach was different from Gryps. The one developed at Gryps was an expensive, cutting-edge model. It quickly adopted innovations like the movable frame and panoramic monitor that would become the basis for the next generation of mobile suits. However, at Confeito, they were thinking about a more economical and efficient operation. In other words, they slightly tuned up the GM Quel and attached a Gundam head to it."

"A GM is still a GM, right?"

"But here's the thing," Hendrick leaned in. "As soon as the Gundam face was attached, something strange happened. Eliard and his team engaged in combat with remnants of Zeon, and during those encounters, the Hazel, their team leader's mobile suit, and Eliard's second unit provided tremendous reassurance to allies and instilled fear and confusion in the enemy. So, the Gundam head indeed had a psychological impact."

Audrey spoke up.

"The Hazel wasn't just a GM with a Gundam face slapped on it. Various parts, like the enhanced backpack and leg thruster units, were reinforced,

and even a shield booster was prepared. In my experience, it truly had the potential worthy of being called a Gundam."

"I see..." Conrad nodded. "If I saw the figure of a Gundam on the battlefield, I'd certainly feel reassured too."

"Commander Murphy was also skilled. He was a renowned pilot who made his debut in the Battle of Solomon during the One Year War and distinguished himself in the Delaz Conflict. Both Carl and Audrey present here were excellent pilots."

Carl shrugged his shoulders.

"I didn't get to pilot a Gundam until much later, though..."

"That's because Carl was in charge of rear support," Hendrick explained. "He often piloted mobile suits equipped with long-range weapons. Anyway, there were many talented young people in the Titans at that time. They believed in the future, convinced their mission was to restore safety and order in the Earth Sphere."

Conrad reminisced.

Indeed, following the Delaz Conflict, the Titans were formed to counter the terrorism of the Zeon remnants.

Eliard, Carl, and Audrey, who were here, fought with fiery ideals, not knowing about the Colony 30 Incident.

"A turning point occurred that day, which would lead to changes in the Gundam development at Confeito," Hendrick said.

"That day?"

"The event that became the catalyst for the full-scale conflict with the AEUG. When the AEUG stole the Gundam that the Titans had created at Green Noa 1."

"Did you know that the Gundam was stolen by the AEUG?"

"No, we weren't informed at the time. But I'm sure those higher up knew. Now that I think about it, that event brought changes to the development at Confeito. The technicians at the Confeito arsenal must have been shocked by the development of a full-fledged next-generation Gundam at Gryps. Tech folks are like that. Moreover, the AEUG began to use that Gundam. Its white body looked even more like a Gundam than when it had the Titans' colors."

"It was called the Mk-II, right?"

"And then, the AEUG kept introducing more Gundam types. Like the golden, shining machine and the transformable mobile suit Gundam. It was as if they had stolen the symbolic Gundam from us."

"But the development of the Gundam continued at Confeito, didn't it?"

"Yes, it was carried out secretly. The policy changed. Until then, the focus had been on how to efficiently operate existing machines. But the technicians at the Confeito arsenal were shocked by the Gundam at Gryps. And they were inspired by the AEUG's Gundams. Somehow, they poured a massive budget into developing a new Gundam. They were chasing a dream. A legend from the One Year War, when a single machine changed the course of the battle. A dream to recreate that legend."

"Compared to the One Year War, the mobile suit's performance had greatly advanced by the time of the Gryps War. Changing the course of the battle with a single machine would be impossible. It's more like a delusion than a dream."

"But they chased that dream. That's why it's a Gundam. A machine called Gundam must inherit that legend without exception."

"What kind of Gundam was being developed at Confeito?"

As Hendrick was about to answer, Joanna's cell phone rang.

"Excuse me."

Joanna said and answered the call, "It's not safe on a mobile phone. Can you call back on the Commander's home phone?"

Joanna hung up the phone, and Conrad asked, "What's going on? Who was that call from?"

"It's from the people investigating the intruders who broke in here. It seems they've identified who they are."

Conrad's home phone rang. He told Joanna, "Please answer."

Joanna stood up and picked up the living room receiver. She listened silently to the caller. After a while, she hung up and said to Conrad, "The names and identities of the two intruders have been discovered. Kelly Brown and Thomas Tyner. Both are soldiers of the Earth Federation Forces. Their rank is sergeant, and they are stationed here at the Nevada base..."

"Who are their commanding officers?"

"Commander Jeffrey Portman."

"Him, huh..."

"Do you know him?"

"Yes, I do. He was in a unit on Luna for a while. He leaned more toward the Spacenoids and detested the Titans. And before being stationed on Luna, Portman was under Commodore Milkov."

"Really?"

Carl said, "So it's like this, huh? The attackers were actually Earth Federation soldiers, and if we trace it back, it leads to the chief judge at the court-martial... And those two soldiers tried to silence Audrey and Hendrick..."

Conrad spoke cautiously, "I believe their target was Audrey and Hendrick, without a doubt. However, whether it was on the orders of their superiors, I don't know."

"But soldiers under the chief judge tried to eliminate the witnesses, right? Do we stand a chance in a trial like that?"

"It's like I said, right? We can't miss out on such a juicy story."

"What are we going to do? Confront the two and demand they tell the truth? Whole lotta good that'll do."

Conrad shifted his gaze from Carl to Joanna.

"How's the leak to the journalists going?"

"I've already informed several trustworthy journalists about the attack. I believe they're investigating on their own."

"The ones with actual backbone?"

"Yes. They're a bunch of rebels."

"Good. Next, leak the names of the two sergeants to them. If they know specific names, they'll be more eager to cover the story."

"Understood."

Hendrick said anxiously, "The Earth Federation Forces' checks are quite strict. It's a quasi-wartime footing, after all. Can those journalists actually report on it?"

Joanna smiled, "Even if they can't report it on Earth or on Luna, they can broadcast it from the colonies. They can also distribute it online. No matter how strict the Earth Federation Forces' censorship is, it's impossible to control all information."

"You're also an Earth Federation officer, aren't you, young lady? You're talking as if the Earth Federation Forces is the enemy."

"Commander Morris's enemies are my enemies. Right now, Commander Morris is fighting against a faction of the Earth Federation Forces that's trying to sentence Lieutenant Eliard Hunter to death."

Hendrick raised one eyebrow in surprise.

"Damn, It's like two Audreys in one."

Joanna said to Conrad, "I'd like to borrow your computer in the study again if that's okay..."

"Use it anytime."

Joanna headed to the study. She'd likely start the information leak right away.

Carl said, "If the journalists leak the source of the information to the Earth Federation Forces, we're done for."

Conrad wasn't worried at all.

"We can trust Joanna. With this, we won't need to expose the truth ourselves. Instead, the journalists will do it for us."

Carl pondered and asked Conrad, "Do you think Commodore Milkov was pulling the strings behind the scenes?"

Conrad thought for a moment and shook his head, "No, that's unlikely. It was probably Portman who thought he was doing it for Commodore Milkov. Portman is the type to make such a misunderstanding."

"So the truth about the attack will work to our advantage?"

Conrad nodded, "Yes. I'll use anything to win."

February 0086
Satellite Orbit Around Earth

"Test Team, capture the Galbaldy β. I repeat, capture the Galbaldy β."

The order came from Aswan.

Eliard instinctively fired the primary thrusters of his Hazel II. He could tell that Carl's Hi-Zack Cannon was right behind him.

"Should I stop it dead for you?"

Carl's voice came through. "With the Hizack Cannon, I can get a clear shot from this position."

"We're ordered to capture, not to shoot it down."

Eliard said while accelerating Hazel II. In terms of thrust alone, his Hazel II should far surpass the Galbaldy β. Physically speaking, there's no reason not to catch up.

The problem was where the Galbaldy β was heading. A mobile suit's operational time is limited due to the extreme restrictions of oxygen and propellant payloads due to its humanoid shape.

A mobile suit alone can't reach Luna or a colony from Earth's orbit. Launching a mobile suit aimlessly from a ship is tantamount to suicide.

Then, a transmission came in from Aswan.

"Unidentified vessel, seven minutes until the closest approach to the Aswan."

So that's it.

Eliard realized the Galbaldy β was trying to flee to the unidentified vessel. But who and for what purpose is someone heading to the unidentified vessel? And to which fleet does the unidentified vessel belong?

Right now, Eliard and his team were on the same orbit as Aswan. So was the Galbaldy β. To board the unidentified vessel approaching on an intersecting orbit, they must change to the same orbit as the ship. This would require a large amount of propellant. Most likely, the Galbaldy β would use almost all its propellant to change its orbit.

On the other hand, Eliard and his team were only accelerating slightly on the same orbit as Aswan. Therefore, their propellant consumption was not that significant. Eliard believed capturing the Galbaldy β, according to Aswan's orders, wouldn't be too difficult.

While tracking the target, Eliard opened the communication line.

"Who is the pilot of the Galbaldy β?"

There was no reply. Eliard asked the same question again, using the standard frequency assigned to Aswan's mobile suits. With no response, he also tried calling on the frequencies commonly used by Earth Federation mobile suits, as well as emergency frequencies.

Is the pilot not listening to the radio?

Eliard wondered.

That shouldn't be the case. The pilot must want to know our intentions since they're trying to escape. Depending on whether we're attacking or attempting to capture, their response would differ.

Just as he was about to call out once more, a sudden response came.

"Oh, you're that happy little fella who's been chasing me?"

The voice and tone were strikingly familiar.

"Lieutenant Maxim Gunar?"

"I've got no qualms with you. Bring me Wes Murphy."

"I don't intend to fight. Please return to Aswan with me."

"I have no intention of going back to a Titans-controlled Earth Federation Forces."

Eliard was at a loss for words.

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I said."

As the two communicated, Carl interrupted.

"The unidentified ship approaching; it's an AEUG vessel, isn't it?"

Gunar's voice, laced with laughter, responded.

"What if it is? Then what?"

"It means you've turned traitor to the terrorists. I'll attack."

"If you don't value your life, then try it."

Gunar's voice was confident. He had fought alongside Commander Murphy during the "Delaz Conflict," so there was no doubt he was a veteran pilot.

Gunar's voice continued.

"If I can take down a Gundam, it'll boost the morale of the AEUG and Zeon remnants. It'll make a great war story."

Eliard clenched his teeth.

"I have no intention of fighting. Please return to Aswan with me."

"I've already told you I won't."

Gunar's Galbaldy β halted its acceleration, beginning constant velocity motion, appearing stationary in orbit.

He seemed ready for a dogfight at any moment.

"Locked on."

Carl's voice was heard. "I can fire the cannon anytime."

"Wait."

Eliard spoke up. "We haven't received orders to attack."

"Are Murphy's subordinates cowards?"

Gunar's voice rang out. "If so, I'll make the first move."

But Gunar didn't move.

Eliard thought he was stalling for time. If he mistimed an orbit change, he'd vanish like flotsam in the ocean of space. No matter how massive a warship, it couldn't save anything that strayed off course and disappeared into the depths of space. All space-faring vessels were constrained by the extremely tight routes of their orbits.

Eliard approached, thinking Gunar wouldn't fire the Galbaldy β's rifle. But Gunar shot it casually.

It wasn't a bluff. He had clearly aimed for Eliard's Hazel II. Eliard had evaded the moment the rifle pointed his way.

Otherwise, it would've been a direct hit.

A beam fired from behind. It was Carl's cannon.

Gunar dodged with minimal movement. He was accustomed to battle. But that wasn't all. He didn't want to use any more propellant than necessary, preparing for an orbit change.

"Hold your fire, Carl," Eliard said.

"We were attacked. It's only natural we have the right to counterattack."

Carl fired again. Gunar's Galbaldy β displayed astonishing mobility. With a single thrust from its thrusters, it effortlessly changed its position and orientation. And with impeccable timing, it returned fire from its rifle. The combination of the suit's performance and the pilot's skill created a synergistic effect.

Eliard realized he couldn't just keep evading forever. If he kept running, he would eventually be taken down.

For now, he needed to stop Gunar's movement.

The moment Eliard opened the target scope of his rifle, an alarm sounded inside the cockpit.

"What the..."

Eliard looked around.

What seemed to be a large-caliber beam had just passed right in front of him. It must have been a battleship's main cannon.

Eliard visually confirmed the approach of a battleship-like silhouette.

"An AEUG vessel..."

Suddenly, his Hazel II was jolted. The Galbaldy β appeared abruptly on the monitor. While Eliard had been distracted by the AEUG battleship, Gunar had closed in.

Gunar's voice came through.

"Turn off your radio. Use the contact channel."

"Why...?"

"The Titans are rotten to the core. They'll collapse with a loud crash before long."

"Is it true that you've turned traitor to the terrorists, Lieutenant Gunar?"

"AEUG isn't a terrorist organization. It's the Titans that are a group of terrorists."

"You can't be serious..."

"I've experienced it myself."

"Experienced... What exactly...?"

"It's time."

Gunar spoke. "Value your life and your pride."

The Galbaldy β distanced itself from Hazel II and ignited its main thrusters. It was at maximum output. The orbit change had begun.

To avoid being caught in the fierce exhaust of the high-temperature gas, Eliard had to retreat.

He couldn't pursue the orbit-changing Galbaldy β.

Eliard stared intently at the Galbaldy β, gradually shrinking within his target scope. He couldn't bring himself to shoot.

Gunar's parting words wouldn't leave his ears.

"Value your life and your pride."

“What had Gunar experienced? What was Gunar's pride?” Eliard couldn't help but ponder.

February 0086
Satellite Orbit Around Earth

The night Joanna made contact with the journalist via email, reports of an attack on Conrad's home appeared on several websites.

When Joanna reported the news, everyone moved to Conrad's study and peered at the computer monitor. The posts were, of course, anonymous. Conrad suspected that the sender must be concealing their identity by routing the messages through multiple servers, making it difficult for even the Earth Federation Forces to track them.

Otherwise, the sender would immediately be targeted by the Earth Federation Forces' military police. As Hendrick had said, they were currently in a quasi-war footing, and the surveillance of ordinary citizens by the Earth Federation Forces was quite strict.

"Now, let's see how this Jeffrey Portman guy reacts..." Conrad said, following the messages on the monitor with his eyes.

"He'll probably try to maintain silence," Joanna said.

"Of course, he would. But we can't let that happen. We have to put pressure on him, make it so he can't sit still."

"Tonight, the names of Kelly Brown and Thomas Tyner will be find their way online."

As Joanna spoke, Carl raised an eyebrow.

"Are we sure those two are the ones responsible for the attack?"

Joanna nodded. "Most likely..."

"But we don't have any actual proof, do we?"

"At this stage, we don't need proof. It's important that rumors start circulating. By tomorrow morning, the entire Nevada base will be whispering about the online posts. Rumors like this spread quickly."

"I see... So, what's the next move?"

"The journalists will take action. They'll request to cover the story about the online posts."

Carl pondered and said, "Naturally, the base will refuse to grant the journalists access."

"The journalists will then report on the fact that they were denied access, or perhaps even air it on television."

"The media will be under military pressure. Most of the current media outlets are spineless. Both TV and newspapers are constantly concerned about the military's reaction."

"That's not always the case," Conrad countered, "There are some tabloid newspapers that have real backbone."

Joanna nodded in agreement. "The journalist I've been in contact with will definitely find a media outlet that will run the story. And they'll do it quickly..."

"I wonder if it'll be in time..." Audrey said. "The court-martial is moving rapidly. Even if the journalist you mentioned works hard, by the time the incident comes to light, the verdict for Eliard might already be handed down..."

"We'll make it in time," Conrad said confidently. "No matter how fast the military wants to reach a conclusion, I'll find a way to delay it."

"But..." Hendrick said with concern, "it took you a long time to find us on Luna."

"It's true that some higher-ups might think that this court-martial is taking too long," Conrad said. "Court-martials are supposed to be swift. Suspects are usually executed by firing squad in no time. However, the way trials are conducted varies from country to country. When the Earth Federation government was established, they decided to adopt the standards of the country that valued human rights the most. The Earth Federation Forces follow this policy, so even in court-martials, sufficient examination is required."

"But the military is still the military," Carl said. "We were stripped of our military ranks, forced to live on the bottom rung, and constantly monitored by military personnel."

"The Judicial Bureau is not a joke. I'll prove that," Conrad declared firmly.

"Why..." Audrey asked, "Why are you so confident, Commander?"

Conrad smiled faintly. "If I lose confidence, who can the defendant rely on?"

Ryou Kirishima finished his work online and made a call to the editor-in-chief of a certain tabloid newspaper. The editor, named Michael Chang, responded with a clearly annoyed tone.

"Calling my home at this hour?"

"A journalist has no time or place, you know that."

Ryou Kirishima retorted.

"Hmph," Michael Chang said sarcastically, "No wonder your wife left you."

"She didn't leave me; I grew tired of her."

"And you called me in the middle of the night for this conversation?"

"Are you aware of the recent buzz online? Two intruders broke into the home of an Earth Federation Forces officer named Conrad Morris. They turned out to be sergeants in the Earth Federation Ground Forces."

"What idiotic officer is he?" Michael remarked.

"Conrad Morris is with the Justice Bureau and is a practicing attorney. Currently, he's representing someone being court-martialed."

"So, what's your point?"

"It's unconfirmed information, merely a rumor at this point, but..."

"Out with it already."

"It seems the defendant in the military tribunal was a Gundam pilot."

"Wh-what...?"

Michael Chang's tone shifted.

As expected, Ryou Kirishima thought smugly. For a tabloid paper, nothing is more important than sales. Sensationalism over journalism, and scoops over facts.

War stories are popular, and the military often uses these newspapers to boost morale. There's no shortage of military mouthpieces.

However, Michael Chang took a slightly different stance. He never criticized the military, but he wasn't afraid to mock them. Like a resourceful Chinese merchant descendant, he never offended, yet never submitted.

Above all, he was a man who valued money. No matter how good the articles, a newspaper that doesn't sell is meaningless. Already, the rise of the internet has hurt newspaper sales. Tabloid papers have long been said to be in fierce competition.

Still, articles about Gundams sell newspapers. The general public craves heroes and symbols, yearning for a noble cause in war.

Gundams were both heroes and symbols of justice. Ryou Kirishima thought there was no justice in war, and any sensible person would agree. But wars continue, and people need a cause and a sense of justice for them.

Michael Chang knew this too.

"Who is this Gundam pilot?"

"I heard they were from the Titans..."

"The Titans, huh..." Michael Chang's voice dropped a notch. "The Titans are not well-liked..."

"Not all members of the Titans are bad."

"That's not the issue. The fact is that the public hates the Titans."

"If the trial is related to Gundam, I'm sure the article would sell."

There was a pause.

"You said that two sergeants from the Ground Forces barged into the home a Judicial Bureau officer, right? So, they were trying to obstruct the defense?"

"That's what I think. The two opened fire inside Conrad Morris's home. At that time, there were two important witnesses with him."

"What do you mean by the trial being related to a Gundam?"

"I don't know. The court-martial is closed to the public. But I have connections. Connections that will leak information..."

"Can we rely on that?"

"Yes. They probably have more accurate information than anyone else."

"Tell me your what you know."

"The Earth Federation Forces want to eliminate the Titans' Gundam pilot. The Gundam should be the symbol of the Earth Federation Forces. They want to erase the fact that the Titans created and operated the Gundam.

They want to erase the memory of the disgraceful past when the Earth Federation Forces were controlled by the Titans."

"AEUG also operated Gundams. Won't the Earth Federation Forces consider that?"

"Anaheim Electronics is behind it all."

Michael Chang's eyes lit up. The huge military industry was a perfect target for tabloid newspapers.

"What do you mean?"

"After the One Year War, Anaheim's influence had become too significant for the military to ignore. They even outsourced mobile suit development to Anaheim. However, the Titans developed Gundams while ignoring Anaheim. Anaheim, which saw the Titans' reorganization of the military as dangerous, decided to support AEUG."

"So...?"

"Through the so-called mobile suit exhibition known as the Gryps War, Anaheim's power grew even greater. Now, it could be said that without Anaheim, the Earth Federation Forces couldn't even exist. Listen, the new Gundam models that AEUG operated were prototypes developed by Anaheim. On the other hand, the Titans operated Gundams developed at the military arsenal from the Confeito Theater Forces. Anaheim wants to seal the history itself. The Earth Federation Forces cannot oppose that."

"So, the Earth Federation Forces' attempt to eliminate the Titans' Gundam pilot isn't just about saving face, but also considering their relationship with Anaheim Electronics?"

"The circumstances are slightly different this time, but something similar happened at the end of the "Delaz Conflict". Although it wasn't made public, the Earth Federation Forces erased the Gundam development project altogether, pretending it never happened."

"I've heard that rumor. I couldn't make an article out of it, though..."

"This time, I'll write the article."

"Can you?"

"First, I'll pick up some topics on the net. The subject is Gundam. Then, the scandal of the Earth Federation Forces and their collusion with Anaheim... The public will be hooked. This article will sell."

There was another pause, during which they thought. Eventually, Michael Chang spoke.

"Submit the first report in an hour. We'll squeeze it into tomorrow's morning edition."

"Then I'll start by sending an article about the attack on Conrad Morris's home."

Ryou Kirishima had a smile on his face.

March 0086
Aswan

The matter of Lieutenant Maxim Gunar smoldered onboard the Aswan and Confeito for a while. Rumors were flying.

Some said that Gunar wanted to join the Titans but was unable to do so, which led him to sympathize with the anti-Federation movement.

However, Eliard found that strange. Lieutenant Gunar had mentioned that he had joined the Titans once and participated in an operation under Captain Bask.

It was probably a rumor spread by those unaware of that fact. But there were quite a few who took the rumor at face value.

There was also a theory that Gunar was a spy for hostile forces. Still, Eliard felt that this lacked credibility as well.

Until now, the only forces that could oppose the Titans were the remnants of Zeon. The fleet from Axis had left the Earth Sphere for the distant main belt. Since the end of the Delaz Conflict, there had yet to be a force capable of infiltrating spies.

Eliard was aware that the AEUG was gaining considerable power. However, the AEUG was still a new force. There shouldn't have been enough time for them to groom Gunar as a spy.

It was true that Gunar had escaped to an AEUG ship. Some argued that this was evidence of his spying activities, but Eliard didn't think so. However, if Gunar were to leak information about the Titans to the AEUG, it would have the same effect as if he had been a spy. So, Eliard thought it was pointless to discuss whether he had been a spy or not.

The real issue was how much information Gunar could provide to the AEUG. They probably wouldn't have accepted him so readily.

The fact that he brought the new Galbaldy β as a gift couldn't be ignored, but Eliard questioned whether that alone would make the AEUG accept Gunar.

Speculation bred more speculation, and the atmosphere within the ship was restless. Commander Murphy, the squad leader, remained silent on the matter of Gunar. They were comrades who had fought together during the Delaz Conflict. Murphy should have been more bitter about Gunar's betrayal than anyone else.

Murphy's silence seemed to speak for the frustration Eliard and the rest of the test team felt.

March 0087
Aswan

Since the Gunar incident, Eliard had become increasingly aware of the existence of the AEUG. However, a year had passed, and the opportunities to hear the name of the AEUG had only grown.

Many colonies were said to have rallied to support the AEUG. Now, the AEUG was emerging as an unmistakable enemy of the Titans, a network of terrorists.

It was on one fateful day that everything became clear.

"Eliard, come. There's quite a commotion happening."

Carl arrived while Eliard was resting in his cabin aboard the ship.

"What's all the fuss about?"

"Never mind that just hurry up."

Carl seemed impatient, a stark contrast to his usual smirking demeanor. Something significant must have happened.

Eliard left his room and followed Carl. A crowd had gathered in front of the television in the recreation room. They were watching a civilian news broadcast. The ship was receiving signals intended for the colony.

"Look there..."

Carl gestured towards the television screen with his chin. It showed footage of a battle. From the mobile suits being used, it was evident that the Titans were engaged in combat.

The announcer was repeating something. Eliard focused on the sound.

"...we have confirmation of combat inside Side 7 within Luna II's area. It is believed to be an act of terror by the AEUG against the Titans, but the cause and details have not been released. I repeat, within Side 7 in the Luna II area..."

Eliard couldn't help but look at Carl's face.

"A battle...?"

Carl nodded.

"It's been smoldering for a while now, but it seems we've finally entered a full-scale combat state."

"Full-scale combat between the Titans and the AEUG...?"

"They should just crush them."

Carl spoke. "The AEUG is a terrorist network aiming to cause political chaos. It's said that conglomerates and corporate entities on Luna are backing them. In other words, the AEUG is a pawn for giant corporations

trying to control not only the Earth Sphere's economy but also its politics and military amidst the chaos."

Eliard knew this as well. The AEUG sought to destroy the post-One Year War order that the Titans had painstakingly built through acts of terror. They were an inexcusable network of terrorists.

If they allowed the AEUG's terrorism to continue, remnants of Zeon and anti-Earth Federation Forces would rise again, potentially sparking another war on the scale of the One Year War. Eliard believed this wholeheartedly.

"What's the cause?"

Eliard asked Carl, "What caused this battle...?"

"The news says it's unknown. So someone must have imposed a gag order."

"Who?"

Carl shrugged.

"Either the Earth Federation Forces or the higher-ups in the Titans..."

A voice came from behind them.

"Hey, the officer briefing has started."

It was likely a briefing in response to the news of the battle. The ship was enveloped in a tension that hadn't been felt before.

Eliard's eyes remained glued to the images of the Titans and AEUG being televised over and over again.

Following the officer briefing, squadron-specific briefings were held. Eliard and his Test Team were called to the mobile suit company briefing. If it came to war, this mobile suit unit would be sent to the front lines. It was clear that every pilot was tense.

Veteran pilots tried to show off their composure by making jokes, but Eliard could feel that this was just a facade to mask their own tension.

"The Titans have entered a state of combat with the AEUG," said Captain Pedersen, addressing the pilots. "We Titans will never tolerate terrorism. The AEUG has been organizing various guerrillas and challenging the Earth Federation government with acts of terror. This battle is a war against terror. There is no justice in terrorism. Justice lies with the Titans, who fight for peace and order. Now, it's time for you to carry out justice. Work to your fullest."

Eliard felt invigorated by Pedersen's unusually passionate tone.

"Furthermore, this ship will now leave Confeito and head towards Earth's satellite orbit. There, we will receive parts for the new mobile armor and, after completing assembly, fortify Earth's security. Be prepared for atmospheric entry, as battles within the atmosphere are possible. At the same time, the Gryps' forces will deploy on Luna II's orbit and fortify their defenses."

It seemed that Aswan would be entering full-scale combat operations. The mobile suit units on the front lines would be forced into even more intense battles than before.

Captain Pedersen's message was enough to motivate Eliard, but a lingering question remained.

What was the direct reason for the Titans and the AEUG to start fighting? Unfortunately, Captain Pedersen did not provide an answer to that immediate question.

A Hi-Zack and a green-colored GM II were fighting on the TV screen. The Hi-Zack belonged to the Titans, while the repainted green GM II was an AEUG mobile suit.

Eliard and Carl stared at the screen, showing a battle in Luna II's orbital path. Gryps' main force and AEUG's flagship had clashed.

"Do you know?" Audrey's voice came from behind them, and Eliard and Carl turned around.

"What are you talking about?" Carl asked. Audrey looked around and lowered her voice.

"The cause of the Gryps incident."

Eliard frowned. "Another online rumor?"

"Just because it's from the internet doesn't mean it's all fake news."

"So?" Carl asked, "What's the cause?"

"They say the AEUG stole a new mobile suit being developed at Gryps..."

"Hmph," Carl said. "Terrorism and now theft... The AEUG is really something."

"It's the stolen mobile suit that's the problem."

"Don't beat around the bush," Eliard said. "What is this mobile suit?"

"A Gundam."

Eliard was at a loss for words. When he thought of a Gundam, he thought of the Hazel. But now he learned that even Gryps had been developing a Gundam.

The symbol of the Earth Federation had been stolen by an anti-Earth Federation force. So it was only natural that the Titans could not remain silent.

Eliard suddenly remembered Lieutenant Gunar's defection to the AEUG a year ago. Not only the Galbaldy β, but he must have needed something more substantial as a gift. Maybe, Lieutenant Gunar knew about the Gundam development at Gryps. He might have provided that information to the AEUG.

It was a plausible possibility, but there was no way to verify it now. So, like many other rumors, it was nothing more than speculation.

"This war..." Carl muttered as if talking to himself. "It'll probably turn into a full-scale battle like the One Year War..."

Aboard the Aswan's mobile suit deck, which had entered orbit towards Earth, pilots were busy adjusting their suits, installing new operation data, and other tasks. They had to be ready for deployment at any time.

These tasks were carried out in collaboration with the mechanics, but there were also many tasks that pilots had to do themselves.

Eliard was reading a mechanical report created at the Confeito arsenal inside his cockpit. This report was the fruit of the Test Team's hard work.

It was a detailed report on every machine that Eliard and his team had tested so far. It could be said to be proof of the Test Team's existence.

It was the data that Eliard and his team had collected, even risking their lives in real battles. As full-scale combat approached, such data would prove even more vital.

Even as a Test Team, they might have more chances to encounter real battles.

Real battles. That's what they desired.

Eliard thought if it was a battle for justice against the AEUG's terrorism, then all the more reason to be eager.

Eventually, the Aswan entered Earth's satellite orbit.

Eliard and his team were receiving a briefing from Commander Murphy.

"Our mission to protect Earth with the Aswan includes our new tests. This is a test for an entirely new ground suppression strategy."

According to Murphy, it was an operation using a new model called the TR-5 Fiver and existing mobile suits. First, the Fiver would be launched like an intercontinental ballistic missile. Then, after flying outside the atmosphere, the Fiver would re-enter the atmosphere. At that stage, support units like the Hazel would be deployed.

The Fiver would launch large missiles from the air, and the support units would land on the ground, rapidly capturing enemy bases.

"Where do the support units come from?"

Carl asked.

Without changing his expression, Murphy replied, "They're mounted on the Fiver."

Eliard didn't quite understand the answer. He had never seen a weapon that could carry mobile suits and fly on a ballistic missile-like course.

"What exactly is the Fiver?" Audrey asked. "Until now, the TR numbers were assigned only to mobile suits or mobile armors..."

Murphy smiled faintly.

"Well, you'll see when you look at it."

Eliard, Carl, and Audrey exchanged glances, intrigued.

Then, the full picture of the experimental machine was revealed. A massive propulsion unit designed for aerial combat was attached to the Hazel. The TR-5 in question couldn't fit in the mobile suit deck, so assembly work was being done outside the Aswan.

Eliard was amazed at the sight. It appeared to be a huge mobile armor, but it was clearly more than just a mobile armor.

July 0088
Repercussions

When Conrad woke up and went to the living room in the morning, Hendrick, Audrey, Carl, and Joanna were already watching the TV screen. Conrad spoke to them.

"Is there an MBA game on this early in the morning?"

Hendrick looked at Conrad.

"It's more than that."

Conrad peeked at the TV screen from behind them. It was a morning news show. Apparently, there had been some military raid on a newspaper company. So, naturally, the TV was harshly criticizing the military's actions.

Even under a quasi-war footing, the Earth Federation government differs from a totalitarian state. In principle, they don't impose censorship on speech. That's why the news anchor could openly criticize the military's actions.

The newspaper company inspected by the military was a tabloid, and it was hard to call it an authoritative newspaper. A plump Asian man was being interviewed.

A credit with the name Michael Chang appeared. He seemed to be the editor-in-chief of the newspaper. He was furious. Thirty minutes after the military inspection, the federal court issued an order banning the sale of today's morning edition and to collect the distributed copies.

"This is clear suppression of speech."

Michael Chang snarled at the TV reporter. "Has the Earth Federation government forgotten democracy? We can't run a newspaper if every article about the military is banned. First of all, does the military have the authority to conduct inspections? This is clearly the military going rogue. They're ignoring civilian control."

Conrad asked Joanna.

"What kind of article did this man, Michael Chang, put in the newspaper?"

Joanna smiled.

"Why don't you see for yourself?"

"Is there a copy?"

"Since I got a call from the person who wrote the article, I bought it at a nearby gas station first thing in the morning. I fully anticipated it to be banned and recalled."

"It's an article full of you-are-there feelings."

Hendrick said, "It's as if the reporter really saw it. But there's no way they actually did, right?"

Conrad looked over the article. It was about two Earth Federation soldiers breaking into Conrad's house. Indeed, as Hendrick said, the writing was quite compelling. Of course, being a tabloid paper, it tended to be overly sensational, but the facts were solid.

Surprisingly, even the names of Kelly Brown and Thomas Tyner were mentioned. They were the sergeants who had broken into Conrad's home. Although their names were treated as rumors circulating on the internet, the fact that they appeared in the newspaper was significant.

The military probably took issue with that point. The higher-ups in the military had influenced the federal court to issue a ban and collection order on the grounds of human rights violations. However, the court's response was too quick.

Conrad felt a fire burning in the pit of his stomach. The military had interfered with the judiciary, and the judiciary had complied. This should never happen. If allowed even a little, it would quickly revert to totalitarianism and a reign of terror.

The Earth Federation government would suffer a significant blow by banning Michael Chang's newspaper. However, the media's criticism would likely focus on the military's rampage and the politicians who can't control them.

"So...?" Carl said. "How determined is this guy, Michael Chang? Do you think he still has the will to fight even after being banned?"

Conrad said, "He doesn't seem like the kind of guy to let such an opportunity slip by. The next issue of the newspaper will probably sell explosively. To increase sales, he has to keep writing about us; otherwise, he'll lose readers."

Joanna nodded.

"According to the journalist who wrote the article, this man values making money more than anything else. So, he might be more trustworthy than a top-tier newspaper that brandishes social justice."

"I see..." Carl said. "So, he won't choose the means as long as it sells?"

"Well..." Conrad said. "Joanna and I will go to the Justice Bureau. We have another hearing in the afternoon. The uproar will likely grow as time goes on. It'll be interesting to see how the prosecution behaves in today's hearing..."

"Aren't we crossing a really dangerous bridge?"

Carl said, "If the journalist who wrote the article gets caught by the military and it's revealed that we leaked the information, we won't be able to help Eliard anymore."

Conrad said with a stern expression, "We must not forget that the military is trying to execute Eliard. At first, the higher-ups must have thought the court-martial was just a formality."

"So, you mean it was a battle with no chance of winning?"

"To be honest, yes. Even now, the situation hasn't improved much. But we have to win. Otherwise, Eliard will be killed. Understand? It's either win or lose. There's no middle ground."

"Are you saying we should be prepared for the risks?"

"I've said it many times..." Conrad said. "To save Eliard, I'll use any means necessary. Otherwise, we can't win."

Carl nodded. "I got it. I just wanted to confirm our position."

Conrad said with a stern expression, "It may be a dangerous gamble. That's why we need to be even more cautious."

"Hmph. The military will use dirty tactics too." Hendrick said, "So we have to do something about it as well..."

Ideally, Conrad would like to win with a straightforward approach. That's why he went to Luna to bring Hendrick and Audrey back and asked King George to help him find Carl.

However, the situation changed the moment the two Earth Federation soldiers tried to snuff out Hendrick and Audrey. Conrad didn't want to admit what Hendrick said.

There is resistance to the logic that it's okay to do something dirty because the opponent does it. But there are times when it's necessary. Conrad believed that's what a battle is like.

The atmosphere in the court-martial was clearly different from the previous day. The prosecution seemed uneasy.

Even Commodore Milkov, the chief judge, appeared to be faltering. It was evident that the influence of Michael Chang's tabloid was taking effect.

"Do you see?" Conrad whispered to Eliard. "The prosecution and the chief judge are unsettled."

"I thought something was different. Did something happen?"

"There was an incident where burglars broke into my house and fired shots."

Eliard furrowed his brow.

"When did this happen?"

"It was the day I brought Audrey and Hendrick back to my house."

"Do you mean the burglars were targeting those two?"

"Clearly. And it turned out that the two burglars were actually Earth Federation Forces sergeants. Their names appeared in a newspaper article this morning..."

Eliard blinked, remaining silent.

Conrad thought he was a perceptive young man.

Eliard probably realized that Conrad and his team had the article written. That's why he didn't say anything.

Conrad continued.

"Those two sergeants are under the command of Commander Jeffrey Portman. And Portman once served under Commodore Milkov and was

stationed on Luna, making him more inclined toward the Spacenoids. He dislikes the Titans."

Eliard nodded and looked at the prosecution. Captain John Gordon glanced briefly at Conrad and his group. He seemed unable to help but be curious about what they were discussing.

Eventually, the trial began.

Captain Gordon continued to ask Eliard nitpicking questions about the two charges he had already been tried for – involvement in the "Colony 30 Incident" and the alleged dangerous actions with the Asshimar.

Eliard patiently answered the questions, never falling for the provocations.

Conrad remembered how Eliard had almost given in to despair. If he had continued like that, there might have been no chance of winning.

But Eliard had bounced back.

As expected of a Titans pilot, Conrad thought.

The Titans' rampage was not something to be condoned. However, the guilt lay with the higher-ups, not the soldiers.

After the Gryps War, the media portrayed the Titans as a group of outlaws, but in reality, highly talented soldiers like Eliard were selected to join.

Many of the young soldiers and officers continued to fight with pride and a sense of duty, regardless of the intentions of their superiors. They needed an indomitable spirit. And now, Eliard was embodying that indomitable spirit.

Captain Gordon's questions dragged on and on.

Finally, Commodore Milkov banged his gavel. Gordon looked at him, startled.

Commodore Milkov spoke with irritation.

"The prosecution is requested to clearly state the purpose of their questions."

Gordon directed his cold eyes at Commodore Milkov and replied.

"I am trying to clarify the facts."

"Repeating similar questions is a waste of time. If there is no need to ask questions about new facts, the prosecution should finish their questions promptly."

Gordon was about to argue but seemed to realize it was futile. He stared at Eliard and said, "No further questions."

Gordon sat down with a bitter expression.

Commodore Milkov asked Conrad, "Does the defense have any questions?"

Conrad shook his head. "No, we don't."

Commodore Milkov declared, "Let me make this clear to both the prosecution and the defense: I will not tolerate any further unnecessary prolonging of the trial. With that said, the court is adjourned for the day."

Commodore Milkov's words seemed to blame Gordon. However, it was clear that wasn't the case. Instead, Milkov simply wanted to expedite the trial and swiftly deal with Eliard.

Conrad whispered to himself, "We won't let that happen."

March 0087
Aswan

All was quiet.

The Aswan orbited Earth, and Eliard and the others remained on level two combat alert for several days. The Hazel Custom was equipped with an air combat unit designed for use under gravity, and the Fiver, assembled on the outside of the Aswan, was also completed.

Eliard had thought they would sortie from the Aswan as they were, but suddenly, the test team was summoned by Captain Pedersen.

"From Gryps, a Salamis Kai-class light cruiser will join us as the Aswan's sister ship."

Captain Pedersen explained.

"After rendezvous in Earth's orbit, the ship will become part of the Confeito unit. The ship's name is the Izmir. However, the mobile suit deck on the ship is empty. They're giving us the ship, but we must provide our own mobile suits. So, I've decided to transfer you, the test team, to the Izmir."

Transfers were a standard part of military life. However, leaving the Aswan was undeniably sad. Eliard felt as if he were leaving his home.

"The Izmir has already received orders to attack a secret base belonging to the Karaba, the Earth's terrorist organization. As soon as you transfer, you will be assigned to this mission. Good luck. In addition, the Izmir will rendezvous with this ship in its current orbit in forty-eight hours. So prepare for the transfer."

Commander Murphy asked,

"What will happen to the Hazel Custom's air combat unit and the Fiver, which were scheduled for testing?"

"You've already been registered as pilots. You'll take them to the Izmir as a sort of giant welcome present. Then, you'll likely use these new weapons in the ground-based attack on Karaba. That's all."

The test team saluted and dispersed.

"It's no joke,"

Carl said as he left the bridge. "Deploying experimental units into actual combat all of a sudden..."

Murphy, who had overheard, said,

"It's not like we haven't experienced this before. Don't whine."

"Captain Pedersen said the Izmir is a Salamis Kai-class, which means it can carry six mobile suits, right?"

Eliard spoke up. "What exactly are we taking with us? Our test team is equipped with the Hazel Custom, Hazel II, and the Rosette. That would be fine, but there's also the Fiver."

"Don't be stupid,"

Carl retorted. "The Fiver doesn't even fit in the Aswan's mobile suit deck, let alone on a Salamis Kai-class. We'll have to attach it to the exterior and launch it from there."

"So, we're taking everything?"

Murphy nodded.

"It seems that way."

"So we'll be taking down Karaba, right...?"

Eliard asked Murphy.

"That's how things are looking."

"Karaba supports AEUG, doesn't it?"

"Yes. You can think of them as the Earth-based support organization for the AEUG."

In other words, we've finally been drawn into a full-scale war with the AEUG, Eliard thought. Of course, he was well aware that the Titans were already locked in combat with the AEUG. However, he hadn't truly grasped the reality of them actually going out to fight the AEUG.

Murphy said,

"A real war is on the horizon. It's completely different from the skirmishes we've had with Zeon remnants. Be prepared."

The Aswan raised its orbit and slowed its orbital speed to await the Izmir. Soon, the Izmir approached from a lower orbit. The Aswan lowered its orbit further, gradually reducing its relative speed to the Izmir. Finally, the relative speed became zero, and the rendezvous was successful.

Immediately, the process of transferring the mobile suits began. Murphy's Hazel Custom, Eliard's Hazel II, and Carl's Rosette carried out the task of securing the Fiver. Audrey was piloting the Fiver with a smooth, untroubled touch.

Suddenly, the alarm sounded. A message came in from the Aswan.

"Three mobile suits approaching rapidly from the 12 o'clock direction."

"AEUG, huh..."

Carl's voice could be heard. "They must have been waiting for this moment..."

Murphy said,

"Protect the Izmir and the Fiver. Don't let them catch us off guard."

"Don't worry about the Fiver,"

Audrey's voice chimed in. "Just focus on the battle."

The monitor captured the approaching trio of GM IIs. Carl began firing his beam rifle. Under cover of Carl's suppressive fire, the Hazel Custom advanced, with Eliard closely following.

In no time, they were engaged in a dogfight.

"Why do I have to shoot at GMs?"

Eliard muttered as he fired his rifle in rapid succession. One of the GM IIs, distracted by Carl's covering fire, was hit directly by Murphy's rifle.

Eliard had also inflicted damage on the second GM II in a swift exchange.

The battle ended quickly. A warship approached from the front. As it passed by the Aswan at a close distance of about a thousand meters, it continued on its way along its orbit. The remaining two GM IIs returned to the AEUG warship. It had been a brief orbital encounter.

"I suppose that was a sort of greeting..."

Murphy's murmuring voice could be heard.

March 0087
Zanzibar, An Orbit Around Luna

"Am I really meant to live?"

Kazak Larson said, "I've already lost a leg, and I can't fight in a mobile suit anymore."

Gabriel Zola answered without looking at Larson. Larson had lost one of his legs in a battle against the Titans' new mobile suit model.

"As long as you're alive, that's enough,"

Zola replied. "Our being alive is proof that we exist."

"The ideal of Zeon has become so distant."

Zola faintly smiled at Larson. Now, Larson was seated in the captain's chair of the Zanzibar.

"Look. The sea of stars."

Zola pointed at the outer space visible from the bridge. "As long as we live in this sea, the ideal will never disappear."

"But to join forces with the AEUG..."

Zola still wore his faint smile.

"There is a saying that the enemy of my enemy is my friend. Besides, the AEUG is an anti-Earth Federation government organization and an ally of the Spacenoids. It's possible to reconcile with Zeon's ideals."

"Axis was supposed to be our hope."

Larson said in a heavy tone. Zola nodded.

"That's true. However, we still don't know which way Axis will lean. We can't wait forever. Even if we want to fight, we don't have decent mobile suits."

The navigator informed them.

"We've entered lunar orbit."

Larson promptly asked.

"How long until we make contact with the AEUG's warship?"

"It's scheduled to rendezvous in ten minutes. The AEUG ship should be coming from a slightly lower orbit behind us."

"Understood. Don't let your guard down. We don't know what could happen. Stay alert."

"Aye, sir."

Larson sighed and then said to Zola.

"The times are changing. Your decision might be the right one."

"The AEUG and Titans are finally fighting one another. We can't just stand by and watch. Continuing to fight is our mission, isn't it?"

"You're right. To fight is to live. I will follow your judgment."

Larson gazed at Zola's profile. He knew full well that Zola wasn't overjoyed to join the AEUG's forces. Even though they were an anti-Earth Federation government movement, many of its soldiers were former Earth Federation military personnel.

The options for the remnants of Zeon were limited. Indeed, Zola's decision might be the best one for now. Until now, they had managed to maintain the Zanzibar with the help of supplies from Zeon sympathizers in each colony. However, that was becoming less feasible.

Each colony was getting caught up in the war between the Titans and the AEUG. If they didn't belong to an organization with reliable supply capabilities, they would be doomed.

"It's here."

The navigator informed them. "It's an AEUG ship. It appears to be a Salamis Kai-class."

"Open a channel."

Larson said, "This is a historic negotiation for us. From now on, this Zanzibar will be affiliated with the AEUG."

March 0087
Memories

Tension gripped his entire body.

The tightness of the normal suit intensifies the tension, making him feel as if panic is creeping up on him.

The smell of sweat inside the helmet. Even with the visor raised, it's suffocating.

While waiting on the mobile suit deck, he had no idea about the situation in the battle. Somewhere, the ship takes a hit, and the entire ship shutters.

The unbearable tension while waiting to be deployed.

Heading out onto the battlefield is terrifying. However, waiting for his turn inside the deck is far more frightening.

Crew members scurry about. Mechanics and ship officers rush back and forth between the mobile suits.

The voice of the controller announcing deployment.

The lamp in front of him changes from red to blue. He's pressed against his seat. It's the acceleration from the catapult.

As soon as he enters the sea of stars, beams and bullets cross, and the incessant light of explosions comes into view. He can't hear the sound of the explosions. Only when a fragment hits the mobile suit's armor does a sharp metallic sound echo in the cockpit.

He was taught many times that when entering the sea of stars, he should use the mass of their arms and legs to control posture to conserve propellant. That's the advantage of a mobile suit.

However, as soon as he enters the heart of the battlefield, he forgets all about that. He must constantly change his position by firing his verniers, or else he will be hit directly.

The light of explosions, the reflection of sunlight on debris, crossing beams, and tracer rounds.

The battlefield is filled with light, light that can take a life in an instant.

Allied mobile suits are being destroyed one by one. Most of the pilots don't survive. The powerful weapon that is a mobile suit becomes a coffin the moment it's destroyed.

Eliard took a deep breath.

Even now, he can't forget the tension of battle. When he remembers the battlefield, the tension comes back vividly, making it hard to breathe.

The battlefield doesn't just have the glory that the military proclaims. Fear and despair swirl there. It's filled with the madness of accepting death and fighting to die.

Eliard knew that all too well.

Eliard took deep breaths, one after another.

Now, confined within the storage room, he felt more terrified about the battle than when he was actually in it.

He didn't remember the dogfights well because they were too frantic. Lights flashed incessantly around him. Voices on the radio overlapped. Everyone was excited, their voices loud and harsh.

He tried to chase enemies, attempting to lock on. Or he tried to escape from being locked on by enemies. That was all he thought about.

A moment of hesitation, doubt, or fear could lead directly to death in that world. However, there was no such awareness during a dogfight. The alternating positive and negative accelerations made it feel as if the blood in his body was being shaken.

Speed, light, and acceleration. These created a unique state of excitement. In fact, Eliard had once laughed uncontrollably because of the excitement. He didn't even realize he was laughing.

He was in a slightly abnormal mental state. To some extent, everyone on the battlefield becomes like that. That's why they can fight.

When he is alone in a quiet place like this, with plenty of time to think, it's hard to believe he was once on the battlefield.

It's hard to believe he killed people and was always close to death.

And he felt genuinely terrified of the battles.

Now, Eliard was tormented by memories of the battlefield. The excitement and fighting spirit that filled the battlefield had vanished, leaving only fear and tension.

In the trial, every time he was questioned, he remembered the battlefield. It was more of a feeling than an image. The vibrations, brightness, and impact came back vividly.

The trial was a battle against the tension of a single mistake potentially leading to a death sentence and a battle against the terror of war memories.

Initially, Eliard thought he would be sentenced to death as soon as the trial started. That's how military trials are. It's not unusual to be sentenced to death after just one hearing.

He had given up before the trial even began. But Conrad gave him hope. Without Conrad, Eliard's death sentence might have already been confirmed.

He didn't feel the reality of facing a death sentence. Nobody would. However, as soon as the trial started, he stopped thinking about his future.

As Conrad brought in witnesses one after another, putting the prosecution at a disadvantage and prolonging the trial, Eliard's mindset began to change.

He realized it one morning when he found himself thinking about what to do after the trial.

He was considering how to live after the trial.

The possibility of a death sentence still remained. Military courts are not meant to expose crimes. They are held to punish military personnel.

But Conrad didn't accept that. He knew Conrad was fighting seriously. Therefore, Eliard had to be serious as well. It was not the time to give up on his life.

Eliard started to feel the possibility of survival. That's why he began to think about the future.

Away from the battlefield, memories of the war became deeply terrifying.

Do I not want to go back to the battlefield?

Eliard asked himself.

Do I no longer wish to board a battleship and fight in a mobile suit?

He could leave the military and find some job. If he could pilot a combat mobile suit, operating a construction or civil engineering mobile suit would be easy. There would be plenty of jobs.

Would he want to live a peaceful life, working in such a job?

That's one way to live.

Eliard listened to the voice of his heart.

It seemed that he wouldn't be able to adjust to that kind of life. That was the answer.

The memories of war were terrifying. But Eliard thought that was because he was not on the battlefield. He knew that once he was in a mobile suit and on the battlefield, not only fear and tension but also fighting spirit and excitement would surge like a storm.

I want to go back to the battlefield.

Eliard realized that.

Even if he wasn't sentenced to death, there might be some penalty.

Dishonorable discharge could be a possibility.

If he can stay in the military, he would want to fight again as a mobile suit pilot.

Eliard finally became aware of his own desires.

I want to be in a mobile suit, after all. To do that, I must win the battle before me.

I must win this trial no matter what.

July 0088
Escape

Ryou Kirishima watched with amusement as Michael Chang's furious face played across the television screen. But, of course, Chang's tirade wasn't born out of pure anger against censorship; it was a marketing ploy. And it worked. The sight of him on TV had undoubtedly boosted sales of his newspaper.

Kirishima was satisfied with the massive response to the article he had written. But he couldn't afford to revel in his success for long; it was clear that the military would soon take action.

Since his piece was a signed article in Chang's tabloid, the military would quickly track down Kirishima's whereabouts.

He couldn't waste time. He needed to disappear immediately. Having crossed dangerous bridges a few times before, he was no stranger to situations like this. So Ryou Kirishima packed a minimal amount of belongings into a backpack and left his house in the dead of night.

As he was about to pull his car out of the garage, he heard the screeching brakes of several vehicles outside. Peeking out cautiously, he saw three olive-drab military vehicles parked. Military police armed with automatic rifles were just beginning to pour out of them.

Their objective was clear even at this hour; they wanted to detain Ryou Kirishima and extract information about the sources of his article, Kelly Brown and Thomas Tyner.

In the worst-case scenario, they might execute Kirishima and bury him in the dark to preserve the Earth Federation Force's reputation. They wouldn't hesitate to do so.

This was no joke, Kirishima thought.

If he were arrested by the police, he could call a lawyer and try to make it work. But he would be utterly defenseless if the Earth Federation Forces captured him.

He had written the article for Joanna. Of course, part of his motivation was his anger at the military's actions, but more than anything, he wanted to impress Joanna and somehow score a date with her.

He had met Joanna at a press conference in the Justice Department. The moment he laid eyes on her, he couldn't forget her—her Russian beauty, intelligence, and military-like demeanor.

He had approached her countless times, but she had yet to agree to a date.

He knew he was being used but thought it was worth it. If he could be useful to Joanna, taking a few risks didn't matter.

Moreover, Kirishima was furious with the current state of the media. With the quasi-war-time footing, the military had become increasingly influential. The Earth Federation government still maintained civilian control in name, but since the One Year War, the military's clout had grown, and the media had become cautious, only reporting benign nothing news.

What a dull world that was.

Kirishima always thought so. That's why he was an outlier in the media world. Authoritarian newspapers all leaned towards the Earth Federation government and the Earth Federation Forces. So he didn't want to write for them.

In this kind of world, a seemingly commercial, third-rate paper like Michael Chang's tabloid could report the truth.

MPs were knocking on Kirishima's door. Three of them stood in front, their actions meticulously coordinated, with another three circling around to the back.

Technically, MPs had no authority to detain civilians. However, the military couldn't involve the police or other intelligence agencies. That's why they acted under the cover of night like this.

Kirishima quietly returned to the garage and got in his car. As soon as he closed the door, he started the engine. The MPs noticed and rushed towards him, rifles at the ready.

"Go ahead, shoot if you dare. It'll be a huge scandal," he taunted.

Kirishima floored the accelerator, and the car burst out of the garage and onto the street, scattering the MPs in its wake.

CHAPTER.05

May 0087
Izmir

"I'll cut to the chase. You'll be heading to Earth."

Lieutenant Murphy and the rest of the Test Team were deployed to the Izmir and arrived at their posts. Captain Thomas Schröder, the ship's captain, spoke, "You are to strike at a hidden base of a terrorist group backed by the AEUG. The details of the operation are in the orders. Commit it to memory."

"Understood," Murphy responded.

At the young age of 35, Schröder commanded an imposing presence. His closely cropped blond hair and cool blue eyes gave him an aura of maturity beyond his years.

As they left the bridge and headed towards the mobile suit deck, Audrey commented, "Do you know what they called the Captain back in his academy days?"

Carl was the first to bite. "What is it?"

"Icicle. Cold as ice and sharp as a spear..."

"Man, that doesn't bode well..."

"But then again..." Audrey continued, "Since seeing combat, his nickname 'Icicle' started being interpreted in a positive light. Never flustered, no matter what. Coldly rational like ice and resolute like a spear. They say he never let a single subordinate die..."

"At that age?" Carl interjected. "How many subordinates did he have during the One Year War?"

"Captain Schröder was already in command of a Salamis at the end of the One Year War," Lieutenant Murphy clarified. Eliard and the others looked surprised. "He was still in his twenties back then. The man is a living legend of the Earth Federation Forces. Didn't you know?"

Even Carl was left speechless.

Three mobile suits—the Hazel Custom, Hazel II, and Rosette—had already been transported to the mobile suit deck, where mechanics were peering curiously into the cockpits.

"Hey, hey," Carl addressed the mechanics over the radio, "These aren't toys, you know."

One mechanic floated down gently. "From our perspective, being able to lay our hands on the Test Team's suits is the highest honor. Oh, Captain

Murphy, right? Welcome to the Izmir. Consider all your maintenance needs as good as handled, just like on the larger ships."

"Forgive my rudeness, but who who might you be?" Murphy inquired.

"I'm Jonathan Cohen, chief mechanic. Really, it's a great privilege for mechanics to be able to work on the test team's machines."

Eliard thought, this person is a true mechanic. Obsessed with mobile suits, it seemed.

"Hey, Rachel, come down. I'll introduce you."

Jonathan called out, and a small normal suit floated down. It was a female mechanic. Her visor revealed a charming face with a hint of innocence, more youthful than beautiful.

Jonathan introduced her, "This is Rachel Sand. Looks can be deceiving; her skills are top-notch. I've personally trained her."

Rachel saluted and said, "Nice to meet you."

Murphy nodded, "Our squad has a lot of demanding tasks. I'm counting on you."

"Leave it to me," Jonathan said happily.

"Seen the Fiver yet?" Murphy asked.

"Have I ever! Looked at it from every angle. Not only can it enter the atmosphere on its own, but it can also carry two mobile suits. That's beyond the scope of a mobile armor; it's a strategic weapon in its own right," Jonathan rattled on, his eyes behind the visor glowing brighter.

"We'll demonstrate that capability. We'll launch Fiver with the Hazel Custom and Rosette on board and make atmospheric entry."

Jonathan's eyes behind the visor sparkled even more.

"I'm all ears. I've never heard of such an operation in the history of mobile suit combat. It's exciting."

"Hey, are you sure about that guy..." Carl whispered softly to Eliard.

"You're in good hands," a confident female voice was heard. It was Rachel. Even if Carl spoke softly, everyone could hear him through the radio.

"I've never seen a tech officer as skilled and knowledgeable as Jonathan," Rachel added.

Carl looked surprised and glanced at Rachel. "This ship seems pretty amazing..."

Currently, the Izmir was in Earth's orbit alongside the Aswan. From there, the Fiver was launched and made its atmospheric entry. During that time, Aswan's mobile suit team and Audrey, aboard the modified Hazel II, were assigned to patrol the surroundings, as the Fiver would be defenseless.

The modified Hazel II was called "Advanced Hazel." This patrol mission also served as a test for the Advanced Hazel.

Eliard was inside the Hazel Custom loaded on the Fiver. Lieutenant Murphy was in its cockpit. The countdown from the Izmir's bridge had already begun.

"You'll experience comms blackout for a while," Captain Schröder's voice sounded. "Is there anything you want to say?"

Lieutenant Murphy's voice could be heard. "We will definitely return to the Izmir. I've taken a liking to this ship."

"Whether you like it or not, you better come back," Captain Schröder replied.

"Yes, sir."

"Alright, confirm the course. If you get the angle wrong, you'll be burnt to a crisp."

"Understood."

Now, it was all up to the computer. Soon, Eliard felt vibrations. The Fiver's main engine had ignited. Just as he felt a sense of weightlessness, the acceleration began abruptly.

Gravity. The Fiver was being pulled into a colossal gravitational well.

"We're all waiting for you to come back," Audrey's voice could be heard, and then the comms went silent.

June 0087
Urup Island, Kuril Islands

The hangar was unforgivingly cold. Despite it being June, the nights still brought a considerable chill. But for Gabriel Zola, this was of no concern.

Compared to space, Earth's climate was like a greenhouse. Those who live on Earth are ignorant of space.

Right now, he was gazing up at the Asshimar that the Earth-based AEUG forces had captured.

"I remember this mobile suit," Zola murmured, "This was the one Lieutenant Wes Murphy piloted."

He recalled that battle. Though its form was somewhat different due to its space specifications, it was undoubtedly the same mobile suit. In space, it was equipped with three leg thrusters that also acted as propellant tanks. Murphy had wielded them like weapons, smashing them against Larson's Gelgoog. Indeed, Lieutenant Murphy's battle prowess was impressive.

"But, I could handle it better..."

Zola was confident. He had fought in outdated mobile suits until now. If given a high-performance model, he'd prove himself even more.

"It's awfully cold..."

A voice came from behind him. It was an AEUG officer who had descended from space along with Zola. The officer looked at Zola, who turned around, and grimaced. He clearly held no affection for him.

The officer said, his voice icy, "To think I'd end up fighting alongside you lot..."

Zola remained silent. The AEUG officer went on.

"I was with the Earth Federation Forces. Many of my friends were killed by the Zeon forces."

Still, Zola remained silent.

"Hey, say something."

Zola stared at the other man.

"Some speak volubly, claiming to speak for those who are no more. Others, like those who are gone, have decided to remain wordless."

The officer looked at Zola, visibly startled and taken aback. Zola spoke again.,

"Do you think that my closest friends weren't killed by the Earth Federation Forces?"

Silence followed. After a while, the AEUG officer hung their head.

"I'm sorry."

June 0087
Izmir

"I heard the rumors on the Aswan. They say you might be the strongest in the test team," the voice rang out on the mobile suit deck of the Izmir, where Audrey was prepping for deployment. She looked bemused.

The voice belonged to her opponent in today's simulation battle, a newly assigned pilot to the Aswan. With Murphy's Team transferred to the Izmir, this new mobile suit squadron served as their reinforcements.

As of now, the only mobile suit team on board was Murphy's team. The conflict with the Titans had intensified, making the Aswan heavily prioritize real combat deployment. All experimentation had been entrusted to the Izmir.

The newly assigned pilot's name was Claude Libel, a motivated young ensign.

"There's no way that's true," Audrey replied. "No one can match Lieutenant Murphy. Both Eliard and Carl have honed their skills through real combat."

"But you've saved them in critical situations, haven't you?"

"Strength is relative. Even in a disadvantaged position, something can tip the balance in your favor."

"You're being modest. But don't you think this simulation battle is stacked against you?"

Audrey would be piloting the Advanced Hazel, a souped-up Hazel II, while Claude would be piloting the Hrududu, a power-boosted component of Hazel capable of independent operation.

"Mobile suits aren't the only weapons. The G-Fighter from the One Year War played its strategic role."

"No use making excuses before the simulation starts."

"Exactly. Let's get to it."

"Please go easy on me."

Claude floated off to his serviced Hrududu. Audrey settled into the cockpit of her Advanced Hazel, smiling. "Talkative, but he's clearly showing respect. That's flattering."

As soon as she deployed, Audrey realized what Eliard had told her was true. This Hazel II was more than a modified GM Quel with added thrusters. It was an unpredictable beast.

Furthermore, with the recent enhancements, it included thrust amplifiers on the legs and soles, a sub-arm unit on the waist armor, and the ability to attach two shield boosters to the back boost pod. These were experimental additions they had tried with the Galbaldy β.

Sitting in the cockpit, the most noticeable difference from the previous version was the newly developed sensor unit on the head. Based on data from the GM Sniper III, this sensor enabled long-range sniping. In other words, it wasn't limited to assault or interception missions but could also support from the rear. In other words, this suit wasn't just for assault or intercept missions, it was also for rear support.

Through the sensor unit, Audrey's field of view expanded, and she could feel the increased maneuverability from the various enhanced thrusters.

She was certain that this wasn't just a next-generation mobile suit; it was something more.

The Aswan and Izmir were both on the same orbit, a satellite orbit around the Earth. From that direction, the Hrududu came into view, the enhanced censors on the Hazel II detecting it quickly.

The enemy was equipped with a long blade rifle for long-range use. On the other hand, Audrey had a standard beam rifle. It was an attempt to bridge the gap in firepower.

When the enemy fired, Audrey had already taken evasive action. In that moment, she felt as if she had been struck by a giant hammer.

"Such incredible acceleration..."

Every thruster was both sensitive and powerful. The original reaction speed of the machine and the enhanced parts were imbalanced, making it the "uncontrollable beast" Eliard had warned about.

"The OS is updated, so I will master it," Audrey vowed, pushing the machine to its limits. She even tried using the sub-arm unit for an energy pack exchange.

The result left her utterly exhausted. Eventually, she was caught by the forceful thrust of Hrududu's long-blade rifle.

Claude commented as he retrieved Audrey, "You were right. Mobile suits aren't just weapons."

Exhausted, Audrey replied, "Don't say anything. Riding this beast is exhausting enough..."

Audrey reviewed the record of the simulated battle with Hrududu multiple times. As a result, she realized she had been moving too much. She had relied on thrust too much and overused the thrusters. Doing so would cause any machine to lose control like a balloon in the wind.

Not all vehicles always utilize a hundred percent of their specs. If she could balance the Hazel's OS with its powerful enhancements, it could rival the next-generation mobile suits.

That much, Audrey was certain of.

Suddenly, an alarm sounded throughout the ship. Audrey received orders to deploy.

Rushing to the mobile suit deck, Audrey was surprised by what she saw. The Advanced Hazel was already in its next experimental phase, equipped with the Hrududu. They were planning to test the enhanced Hazel, named the Hazel-Rah, with the full armor equipment. This was an extra step in testing the Hazel with the full armor parts attached.

"You haven't removed the Hrududu?"

"It's captain's orders to sortie like this."

"We haven't even tested it."

"Take it up with the captain," Jonathan retorted.

Cursing under her breath, Audrey jumped into the cockpit as communications from Captain Schreder came in.

"The enemy is three GM II's. They belong to the AEUG."

"What about reinforcements from the Aswan?"

"Denied. We've got to deal with about three mass-produced units ourselves. After all, we're wielding a Gundam."

"The Hazel-Rah hasn't even been fully tested yet."

"We'll collect data as we go. Think of this as the test."

The commander and Eliard had been forced into battles like this many times before. Audrey bit her lip before responding, "Understood."

Captain Schröder had a reputation for never losing a subordinate. With the Hazel-Rah's capabilities and Audrey's skills, he probably judged that overpowering the enemy would be easy. There was no choice but to trust his judgment.

"Audrey unit, Hazel-Rah, launching."

Currently, the Izmir was orbiting a few kilometers behind the Aswan on the same trajectory, a satellite orbit. Three GM II mobile suits were attempting to attack the Izmir.

The enemy noticed Audrey's unit and fired aggressively. Beams from rifles crossed paths. Audrey skillfully used the thrusters to evade.

"Don't overdo it," she muttered in her mind. Still, she gained enough acceleration.

As she had thought. A wild horse could be a splendid horse if handled correctly.

The enemy couldn't keep up with Hazel-Rah's agility. She tried the Hrududu's thrusters. The mobile suit rapidly accelerated upward to the left, feeling a diagonal torque.

"Is the center of gravity even calculated correctly?"

She had to use the leg thrusters to balance before the mobile suit began to rotate. Seeing the opening, one GM II tried to flank from behind.

"I see through your moves."

Audrey fired as she turned, the long blade rifle belching fire. The beam grazed the enemy unit.

The remaining GM II fired its rifle in that instant. Audrey had already unconsciously entered evasive action. The Hazel-Rah responded easily.

The three enemy mobile suits began to retreat. Maybe they reached the limit of their operation time or perhaps they realized the power difference with the Hazel-Rah.

Audrey switched her monitor to sniping mode, using the mono-eye sensor after opening its cover. She locked onto a GM II, now just a small speck. The beam from the long blade rifle pierced through the GM II. A direct hit.

The Hazel-Rah is useful after all, Audrey thought. But it needs some adjustments.

June 0087
Kamchatka

A siren wailed through the building—old-fashioned, something seldom heard these days. Karaba, the support organization of the AEUG, had secret bases scattered in various locations on Earth, and Kamchatka Base was one of them. Built on an abandoned mining site, derelict excavation machinery lay rusting above ground. But within the hangars disguised as old warehouses, rows of mobile suits stood at the ready.

There were units supplied by the AEUG, as well as ones seized in battles against the Titans. The Asshimar, undergoing repairs at the Torrington Base, was also scheduled to arrive here soon.

Gabriel Zola had been assigned to the Kamchatka base ahead of time, waiting for the arrival of the Asshimar. The residential area was located underground, and Zola sprinted through the sirens towards the storage hangar.

"What's going on?" Zola asked a nearby mechanic.

"It's an air raid. Titans' mobile suits."

"An airstrike with mobile suits?"

"They're riding Base Jabbers."

Zola couldn't believe that mobile suits were attacking from the sky on Earth. To him, mobile suits were weapons designed to be used in zero gravity. It seemed impossible to use them on Earth, bound by gravity, let alone to fly within the planet's atmosphere. Mobile suits were not originally designed for aerial combat. Nevertheless, recent developments had led to the use of support equipment like Base Jabbers for airborne battles and airstrikes.

Some units were even designed to fly within the atmosphere on their own. The Asshimar assigned to Zola was one of those. Times were changing.

"I'm going out as well."

"But the Asshimar hasn't arrived yet."

"How long are the repairs going to take?"

"Don't be unreasonable. We've salvaged damaged units from battles."

"Aren't there any deployable units?"

"Over there, the GM II..."

Pointing at a suit, the mechanic mentioned it to Zola, who muttered:

"Me, piloting a GM...?"

"For Karaba, mobile suits are incredibly valuable. Please don't break them."

"I understand."

When Zola exited the hangar in the GM II, the base's defense team of GMIIs and Nemos were already engaged in combat against enemy forces.

Three Hi-Zacks and as many Marasai were the enemy. For a moment, Zola felt disoriented, as though the combatants were flipped. It looked as though a GM was fighting a Zaku.

"That form was once Zeon's pride," Zola said, aiming at a Hi-Zack's Base Jabber and firing. The enemy took evasive maneuvers and began firing from above.

Walking on two legs in a mobile suit was incredibly cumbersome. Just moving around caused the cockpit to shake intensely, making the ride more uncomfortable than any other vehicle on Earth.

Moreover, quick movements were out of the question. From the perspective of enemies freely flying through the air, mobile suits on the ground were no different than stationary targets.

"They're the same if we can just bring them down to the ground."

Zola kept targeting the Base Jabbers. A friendly Nemo got hit, exploding violently.

It turned into misfortune for the enemy. Hit by the blast, the Base Jabber lost control. Two Base Jabbers plummeted. The pilots of the Hizacks and Marasais on them used their backpack thrusters to land on the ground.

Zola sniped a Marasai as it landed. Another Hi-Zack began a furious assault.

"That appearance... I can't forgive it."

Zola shot and disabled the sensor on the Hizack's head with his rifle.

Although Karaba's base defense team was somewhat on the defensive, Zola's intervention was quickly turning the tide in their favor. They might be able to push through.

Just as he thought that, his sensors detected something. Something approaching at high speed and high altitude.

"A ballistic missile...?"

Zola looked up at the monitor, which displayed the sky.

Staring at the monitor, Gabriel found himself looking up at the sky.

June 0087
Nevada Base, North America

About a month ago, the AEUG launched an assault on Jaburo in South America. The Titans, aware of this plan well in advance, had decided to vacate Jaburo. Many of its functions were transferred to Africa, while some were dispersed to various locations, including North America.

Nevada Base was one such location.

The members of Eliard's Test Team had been ordered to carry out a sortie that also served as a trial operation for the TR-5 Fiver. Murphy was piloting the Fiver while Eliard and Carl boarded the Hazel Custom and Rosette, respectively, which were attached to the Fiver.

In this setup, they were launched from Nevada Base using auxiliary rockets, similar to ballistic missiles. It was a full-on assault. Their target was Karaba's secret base in Kamchatka.

The Fiver's launch preparations were already complete. The three of them were securely strapped into their cockpits.

"We're about to break free from gravity and enter outer space. From there, we'll re-enter and launch a surprise attack on the enemy's facility."

Murphy's voice echoed.

"Understood, we will deploy within the enemy's airspace and provide cover for the squadron leader," Carl's voice chimed in.

"Roger that," Eliard gave a short reply. While Carl had already experienced engaging in combat right after atmospheric reentry during the Dandelion incident, Eliard had yet to go through such an experience.

"Prepare for extreme G-forces when we break from gravity; it's something all the old astronauts had to go through," Murphy advised. "For those of us usually stationed at Confeito, it's a valuable experience. Savor it."

The countdown soon began.

Launch countdowns were never good for the heart, Eliard mused.

The auxiliary rockets fired, and the force pinned them into their seats, momentarily immobilizing them. It felt like their insides were about to be flung outside.

Then, the weight that had been pressing them down vanished. Suddenly, they were in a weightless world. The monitor displayed stars in space. But it was fleeting. Soon, they noticed that the Fiver had begun freefalling.

Wrapped in the heat of atmospheric friction, the temperature of the craft rapidly rose. Violent turbulence rocked them, the craft quaking as they burned. They were trapped in this state.

Human beings have no business riding ballistic missiles, Eliard thought.

Finally, the blackout lifted. A message from Nevada Base came through: "Our first assault team is currently engaged with Karaba's base defense forces in Kamchatka. Capture it immediately."

"Understood," Murphy replied.

Eliard mentally replayed the tactical steps in his mind. Murphy issued a new command.

"Eliard, Carl, we're entering enemy-controlled airspace. Split and flank. And don't underestimate Earth's gravity."

The Hazel Custom and the Rosette detached from the Fiver. Eliard engaged the shield booster and main thrusters to slow down. However, their speed didn't decrease easily. The ground was rapidly getting closer.

The impact upon landing was massive. It was almost a miracle that the Hazel Custom remained intact. Eliard felt as though his body had shattered.

No time to wallow in the shock. Immediate cover for the Fiver was needed. Eliard regained control, and assessed the situation. The combat between the first assault team and Karaba's defense force seemed to be at a standstill. He unleashed his rifle.

The Fiver descended at high speed from the sky, transforming into mobile suit form just before landing, causing a storm of dust with its mighty thrusters.

With a large missile, the Fiver destroyed the base facilities. Amid the rising smoke, it touched down. The tides of battle shifted in their favor, and the enemy began to withdraw.

July 0088
Pursuit

Earth Federation military vehicles pursued the car that Ryou Kirishima was driving. At least three sets of headlights were visible in the rearview mirror. It was late at night, and the residential neighborhood was desolate. Kirishima gunned the engine, zipping past silent homes, aiming for the highway.

Caught means killed. Or, at the least, brutal interrogation. Torture. That's what the military does.

“This is no joke,” Kirishima thought.

He didn't want to become a puppet of the military, but he also didn't want to endure torture. His only option was to shake them off. The highway entrance was now in sight.

Suddenly, his left-side mirror exploded. A glance at the rearview revealed a flash of orange.

Muzzle fire.

The Earth Federation MPs had opened fire.

"You've got to be kidding me..." Kirishima muttered under his breath, shrinking back in his seat. Even though it was a clear overreach to pursue or attempt to capture a civilian, they were now actually firing shots at him. The impact on the mirror meant they weren't firing warning shots. They were shooting to kill.

What in God's name had happened to the Earth Federation? After the end of the Gryps conflict, the media demonized the Titans. And rightfully so; the upper echelons of the Titans had committed atrocious acts. Using tactics like poison gas and a Colony Laser, they terrorized and sought to dominate people. That's why, after the war, the Earth Federation military condemned former Titans personnel.

The Earth Federation's stance had been widely accepted by society, largely due to the overwhelmingly negative image of the Titans.

But now it seemed the Federation were no saints either. As he dodged bullets, swerving left and right, this thought gnawed at him.

He was almost at the highway entrance. Once he got onto the highway, the military wouldn't be able to act as recklessly with witnesses around.

Kirishima's heart was in his mouth, pleading silently to every god that ever was. If he got caught, Joanna would be endangered too. He had no

faith that he could withstand torture without spilling secrets. He didn't want to be silenced by death either, so he floored the gas pedal.

Finally, Kirishima's car reached the highway. Despite the late hour, there was a decent amount of traffic. His car, a seemingly old-fashioned station wagon, had a tuned-up engine and packed a wallop. He had confidence in its power. The roar of the engine was like that of a caged beast suddenly set free.

He kept overtaking other cars one by one. The military vehicles' headlights grew smaller and smaller in his rearview mirror.

Serves them right.

Just when Kirishima allowed himself a smirk, he noticed something odd. An eerie glow surrounded him. It felt as if his car was enveloped in light while everything else was dark.

What the...

He noticed an engine sound entirely different from his own. An explosion-like sound.

Damn, a helicopter... The MPs must have called for backup.

They're not playing. Kirishima checked his seatbelt. If they were pulling out all the stops, evading them wouldn't be easy. So he had to get a little reckless.

The helicopter shined its lights at him menacingly. As he looked through the windshield, he saw its military-grade body with rotors on either side, trying to get ahead. Possibly trying to cut him off.

Panicking and slowing down would allow the MPs' vehicles to catch up from behind. Kirishima never let up on the gas pedal.

The helicopter overtook Kirishima's car and descended, a battle of endurance. He kept his gaze fixed on the road ahead.

He didn't have any room left to think. All he could do was grip the steering wheel tightly. The cars ahead sensed something and made way. Kirishima raced through the gap at high speed.

The helicopter descended lower, its rotors churning the air so violently it almost wrenched the steering wheel from his grip. The car's body trembled violently.

The helicopter's rotors seemed to cover the upper half of his windshield. Suddenly, the helicopter jolted left and right. Just as he realized that, it seemed to lose balance, and one of its rotors dropped.

That rotor collided with the front end of Kirishima's car. It seemed like a minor impact, but the high-speed collision generated an unexpected force.

The car immediately spun around. The scenery outside the window flowed like a panorama. Lights streaked behind him.

He heard himself scream. There was a jarring impact. The roof above the rear seats caved in. Then, another blow from the side stopped the car's spin. For a fleeting moment, he felt weightless.

The car crashed through the guardrail and tumbled off the highway. Kirishima unconsciously unbuckled his seatbelt.

The car skidded down the embankment. Beyond it was a forest. Kirishima tried to open the door, but the twisted frame made it difficult to open.

Turning his body sideways, he kicked the door. On the third attempt, the driver's door finally opened. Kirishima's body was thrown out of the car. He rolled through the grass on the embankment, disoriented.

He eventually crashed into a thicket of bushes, finally stopping.

His beloved car burst into flames. His mind felt numb, unable to process what he was seeing.

Eventually, the flames spread to the forest. The highway above was in a worse state. Above, it was as if daylight had broken. The helicopter had crashed and was engulfed in flames.

I need to get away...

Kirishima finally snapped back to his senses. He tried to get up, but his body refused to cooperate. He crawled through the dense bushes and moved deeper into the woods.

Unable to stand, he continued forward while on all fours.

No way am I getting caught.

Kirishima repeated this phrase in his mind, gasping for breath.

July 0088
Retrospect

"In regard to Eliard's two charges, we can safely say that we've largely contradicted the prosecution's arguments," Conrad said.

They were conversing in the living room as they always did after dinner. Audrey, Carl, Hendrick, and Joanna were all present.

"Meaning..." Conrad continued, "The suspicion of involvement in the Colony 30 Incident and the charges concerning dangerous conduct at the Khartoum base."

Carl spoke up, "The issue lies with the remaining two..."

Conrad nodded, "Right. The prosecution also considers the remaining two as the main charges. Those two are related to the Colony Laser battle. They're doubling down, so I want to learn as much as possible about the circumstances back then."

Audrey, Carl, and Hendrick's expressions darkened suddenly.

Carl said, "It was a hellish battle. A three-way clash between the Titans, AEUG, and Axis. A chaotic fleet battle with friend and foe mixed up. After leaving the Izmir, we got separated, not knowing where anyone was."

Audrey nodded, "He's right. I didn't know where Carl or Eliard were either."

Conrad was surprised and asked Audrey, "You were in combat too, weren't you?"

"Of course. At that time, I wasn't in a mobile suit, though."

"But weren't you all test pilots?"

"As the conflict between the Titans and AEUG escalated, our squad was deployed into combat more frequently. Or rather, they began sending us into battle with new models to gather data recklessly."

"That's right..." Hendrick said in a reflective tone. "Things were fine when the Murphy Team was on the Aswan. But after they got transferred to the Izmir, the Aswan got sucked into the quagmire of war..."

Conrad felt the need to draw out their memories. "During the Colony Laser battle, you guys weren't sure of Eliard's whereabouts, correct?"

Audrey nodded. "No. Had no idea where he was."

"I eventually went to back him up," Carl said. "He said it was his mission but didn't elaborate."

"In that case, you can't testify about Eliard's remaining two charges," Conrad concluded.

Audrey and Carl exchanged looks as if trying to pry open sealed memories—memories probably kept at bay since the war, especially being hunted by the Earth Federation Forces or kept under surveillance.

Carl pondered, "The captain might know something."

"True," Hendrick added. "After the Izmir sank, the Aswan salvaged all Izmir-affiliated units."

Carl nodded, "I was also taken in by the Aswan."

"Eliard and Murphy got there before you. And then Eliard was slated to sortie in a new suit..."

Hendrick was trying to recall something intensely. "Before sortieing, Eliard was called over by Murphy. Murphy was injured."

Conrad thought this might be an important point, "Was there anyone who overheard their conversation?"

Hendrick shook his head, "I don't know. Maybe Captain Pedersen heard it over the ship's monitors, but he's gone now."

"Then Eliard, leaving the frontline in a new model, destroyed the very weapon he piloted..." Conrad muttered as if confirming for himself.

"There's one more who might know the circumstances when the new model was destroyed," Carl revealed. "The enemy who chased Eliard to the end—yeah, his name is Gabriel Zola."

June 0087
Kamchatka

"What in God's name is that?" Gabriel Zola muttered, his gaze glued to the monitor of his GM II.

What he had thought was a ballistic missile suddenly decelerated in the sky, shedding its heat shield, and out popped two mobile suits. One bore a resemblance to a Marasai but was painted in Titans colors. The other was unmistakably a Gundam. And the main body that released them appeared to be a mobile armor.

An enemy that arrived from outer space through a ballistic trajectory, firing and deploying mobile armors and mobile suits mid-flight—it was an unexpected assault that no one could have predicted.

The Karaba forces at the Kamchatka base were stunned by the enemy's unforeseen appearance, a nervous energy permeating the air. Within their ranks were veterans of the One Year War, driven by a lofty ambition to support the AEUG. However, they were still a hastily assembled force. Morale wavered when the tide of battle turned against them.

"Don't panic," Zola radioed to his allies. "Once they land, they'll be subject to the same conditions as us."

Words alone wouldn't suffice. Zola knew he had to lead by example. The surrounding area was cloaked in a thick haze of smoke and dust, thanks to the large missile launched by the enemy mobile armor. The smoke offered cover. Seizing this opportunity, Zola advanced his GM II. To regain lost ground, overwhelming firepower and sheer audacity were essential.

Though his beam rifle and GM II specs were not optimal for firepower, he would have to make do with audacity alone. If he didn't step forward, his retreating allies would be less likely to hold their ground. The incoming enemy's mobile armor transformed into mobile suit form in mid-air.

"What monstrosities had the Titans created?"

Beside it was the Gundam. Zola felt his blood boil at the sight of its head design. A Gundam on the battlefield was more than just another mobile suit. It was a legend, a symbol of victory since the One Year War, and an object of terror and hatred for Zola and his Zeon remnants.

The new model mobile armor was a threat, no doubt. But for Zola, the Gundam was of even greater significance.

While advancing, Zola took a shot at the Titan's Gundam. Eliminating it would surely boost Karaba morale.

Suddenly, a Marasai in Titans colors burst into the half-destroyed base. Hiding in the shadows were retreating Karaba forces in their GM IIs and Nemos.

This Titans-colored Marasai looked slightly different from a standard one.

"It must have some special purpose," Zola intuited.

"You're not going anywhere," Zola aimed his rifle at the Titans-colored Marasai and pulled the trigger. But nothing fired.

"Damn, out of energy..." With no ammunition, Zola was as good as a sitting duck. He saw the Gundam aim its rifle.

To die here, like this... I'd rather die fighting in space. That's the noble death for a Spacenoid.

Just as Zola braced himself for the inevitable, beams and missiles fired from behind him. Now it was the Gundam and the new model that were retreating. Karaba's GM IIs and Nemos had followed Zola's lead and turned the tide.

"Captain Zola, you're out of energy for your rifle, aren't you?" came a voice over the comms.

"Yes, I'm out. And stop calling me Captain."

"Please fall back. We'll take it from here..."

"Thank you," Zola retreated. The clash between Karaba's mobile suits and the Titans had reached another deadlock.

Rifles were available at the base, but it was half-destroyed, and entry looked improbable. If he needed a rifle, he'd have to dig through the rubble.

"Damn it all," Zola screamed into the comms. "Someone, give me a gun."

But it was a cry in vain. Every ally was overwhelmed by fighting the Titans. Their second wave of just three mobile suits, led by superior tech, was overpowering Karaba's suits.

I'll fight them with the rubble if I have to.

Zola gripped a chunk of reinforced concrete with his GM II's manipulator.

That's when a new communication came in.

"Gabriel Zola. I've brought you something better than a rifle."

It was a familiar voice, an ex-Federation pilot who had confronted him in the secret Urup base.

Zola scanned the monitor. Something was descending from high above. He zoomed in.

"Is that—"

"I've kept you waiting. It's your Asshimar. Take it."

"Something new coming in from one o'clock," Carl's voice rang out. "Hey, isn't that an Asshimar? Isn't that on our side...?"

Eliard, too, sensed its arrival. It seemed to land behind enemy lines without directly joining the fight.

"Stay alert," warned Commander Murphy. "It's not sending friendly identification signals."

"What... The enemy is already on the defensive," Carl spoke. He piloted the RX-107. It looked like a Marasai but was modified with the Dandelion's Core Unit, earning it the nickname "Rosette" in the Confeito Area Forces.

Carl's Rosette pushed forward, propelled by its thrust engines. As if to keep it in check, the Asshimar shot into the air in its mobile armor mode.

"If this is to be a dogfight, then we're far from beaten," came Murphy's voice as the Fiver jets—outfitted with thrusters on both sides—blasted hot gas, soaring lightly through the sky.

In mid-air, the Asshimar and Fiver crossed paths; their sonic boom rippled to the Hazel Custom, piloted by Eliard.

On the ground, Eliard had been holding back a GM II and Nemo near the base. He'd thought the Asshimar was engaging in aerial combat with Murphy's Fiver alone. But suddenly, the Asshimar transformed into its mobile suit form.

"What—" Eliard found himself flanked. The Fiver from above attacked Asshimar, who skillfully dodged while targeting the Hazel. A beam grazed Hazel's frame.

Trapped between the GM II and Nemo in the front and the Asshimar in the back, the Hazel had no choice but to use its backpack thrusters. Eliard made a decisive jump. In mid-air, he fired the rifle.

The Asshimar used its leg thrusters to glide across the ground as if skating.

The impact of landing assaulted Eliard.

"Damn this Earth gravity," he muttered, shaking his head and reassessing the battleground. His jump had enabled him to break free from the pincer attack.

"Nice maneuver, Gundam," said a voice on their frequency. It was the Asshimar's pilot.

"I recognize that voice," Murphy replied. "Gabriel Zola, right? Why are remnants of the Principality of Zeon fighting with Karaba?"

"For a just cause. Your voice is also unforgettable. Wes Murphy, isn't it? Are you the one piloting the Gundam?"

"I'm above you."

"The new model, eh? Then who's piloting the Gundam?"

Eliard interjected, "Lieutenant Eliard Hunter. I'm piloting the Hazel."

"Hazel? Is that another name for a Gundam? Very well, Lieutenant Hunter, I'll be the one to bury that Gundam of yours."

What an outdated way to speak, thought Eliard as he unleashed a barrage from his rifle. Murphy's Fiver dove from the sky to join the assault.

"Carl, secure the base quickly," Murphy commanded. "The tide has already turned."

Indeed, as Murphy had said, most of Karaba's mobile suits had been hit, and their rifles were out of energy.

The Asshimar's pilot seemed to have noticed this. Transforming back into its mobile armor mode, it flew off into the eastern sky.

"Do not pursue," Murphy cautioned. "He retreated after assessing the situation. He's a formidable opponent."

Soon after, Karaba's Kamchatka base was secured by Murphy's squadron.

June 0087
Izmir

Alarms reverberated through the ship.

Audrey, who was already on standby in the mobile suit deck, promptly vaulted into the cockpit of the Hazel-Rah.

Two Hrududu were equipped on the Hazel-Rah—a pair of thrusters were affixed to the joints of its backpack, and a claw-wing unit designated for weapon control and maintenance was attached to its waist. Thrusters were mounted here as well. This was known as Hazel-Rah's 'Second Form,' a configuration developed through intricate balance calculations, influenced by Audrey's own suggestions.

Last time the Hazel-Rah was deployed, they discovered that the Hrududu caused a vertical torque during acceleration. Although this could be counterbalanced by leg thrusters, the Second Form had improved upon this. Thrusters at the waist enhanced the acceleration while negating the torque.

However, this rendered the Hazel-Rah something barely recognizable as a mobile suit. They had struck a balance between thrust, operational range, and the inherent functionality of a mobile suit.

"A Zanzibar is trailing us on the same orbit," Captain Schröder's voice came through. "It's confirmed as an AEUG ship. They've launched three mobile suits: Nemos. Intercept them."

"Roger," Audrey acknowledged. "Hazel-Rah, moving out."

No need for a catapult. The thrust and propellant capacity of the twin Hrududu were more than sufficient for standard operational time.

As soon as she exited the Izmir, Audrey acquired his targets—three Nemos. She activated the sniping mode on her mono-eye, aimed her dual long-blade rifles. The enemies were not yet in rifle range.

Firing both long-blade rifles, the power was impeccable. One of the Nemos was hit directly.

A ball of fire erupted.

The remaining two Nemos spread out left and right. Thanks to Hazel-Rah's acceleration, the distance between them closed rapidly. They engaged in a dogfight.

Executive Officer Enrique Hammond was on the bridge of the Izmir, his eyes glued to the monitors, trying to get a handle on the situation.

He had a long history with Captain Schröder, both having fought together in mobile suits. He understood Schröder—who was called 'Icicle'—better than anyone else.

Against our one, they have three Nemos, Enrique thought.

It must be a tough battle for Audrey. And it's not just Audrey; Captain Schroeder seemed to be pushing everyone hard, including Murphy's Team. Maybe some resent him for it, but Enrique understood Schröder's intent.

The training was harsh because staying alive as a mobile suit pilot was harsh. That was the kind of man Thomas Schröder was—a man willing to play the villain to keep his subordinates alive.

"Hmm," Captain Schroeder murmured, pulling Enrique out of his thoughts.

"What is it, sir?"

"The way Audrey fights, it feels familiar."

"I thought so, too," Enrique nodded.

"Like the Dendrobium, perhaps?"

"Captain, the Dendrobium is supposed to have been erased from history."

"True. But when you push weapon development in a certain direction, similar constructs are bound to appear. And here we have young ones recreating those battles."

At that moment, Audrey successfully shot down all the enemy units.

Maybe Captain Schröder had even calculated that Audrey would awaken to this style of combat, Enrique thought.

July 0088
Retrospect II

"The enemy?" Conrad echoed, not quite masking his incredulity. "You're saying Gabriel Zola was once part of the AEUG?"

"He was a remnant of the Zeon forces when we first encountered him," Audrey confirmed.

"A Zeon remnant..."

"Yes, operating a lone Zanzibar-class cruiser. Our first engagement with them occurred during an escort mission for a transport vessel near Colony 30."

"So, are we saying..." Conrad selected his words with caution, "That they had prior knowledge of the Titans' intentions at Colony 30?"

"That's unlikely," Carl interjected. "They had no other choice but to fight. After losing the One Year War, and with the Delaz Fleet quelled, they were outcasts even among the remaining Zeon forces that had retreated to the asteroid belt. They survived while receiving sporadic supplies from anti-Earth Federation government movements and Spacenoid sympathizers, barely keeping the Zanzibar operational and piloting mobile suits on the verge of falling apart."

"I've heard there were quite a few such Zeon remnants," Conrad noted. "Most of the Zeon populace settled in the Republic of Zeon, but military men took exile. The Republic was, in essence, under Earth Federation control."

"I first heard Gabriel Zola's name when we clashed with them near Confeito in October of 0085," said April. Carl nodded his agreement.

"Gabriel Zola was obsessed," Carl revealed.

"Obsessed?" Conrad questioned. "With what?"

"With Confeito, or Solomon as they call it. And with Gundams. He engaged the Hazel obsessively."

Conrad understood. Gundams weren't just any mobile suits—they were the stuff of legend, a symbol. If you were a Zeon remnant, it would make sense to be fixated on Solomon, a major battleground during the One Year War, as well as the Gundam, a single unit that had dramatically shifted the course of battles. Conrad, once a mobile suit pilot himself, understood well.

Audrey continued, "Gabriel Zola's Zanzibar eventually joined the AEUG. We've also confirmed he had a brief stint with Karaba."

"I had occasionally heard of Zeon remnants joining the AEUG," Conrad acknowledged. "Given the Titans were gaining a stronghold within the Earth Federation forces, it's understandable they'd oppose them."

"Even afterwards, Gabriel Zola never stopped pursuing the Gundam. Defeating a Titan's Gundam was a matter of pride for a former Zeon soldier."

"The irony is," Carl quipped, "the Gundams that got media attention during the Gryps War were actually from the AEUG, which Zola had joined."

"For Zola, the Gundam had to remain the enemy," Audrey clarified. "That's why he continued to pursue our test team's Hazel, as well as the lost new Gundam model."

"Is it certain that this Gabriel Zola was chasing the phantom Gundam piloted by Eliard during the battle over the Colony Laser?" Conrad queried.

"Without a doubt," Hendrick assured. "I've seen battle monitor data. Eliard left the front lines. There was an enemy unit in pursuit. It was definitely Zola. What happened afterward is known only to Eliard and Zola."

Conrad had spoken with Erhard several times and listened to his accounts. However, he had never heard Gabriel Zola's name from Erhard's lips.

He pondered why. The reasons could only be known by Erhard himself.

Many of the soldiers with AEUG had later joined the Earth Federation Forces after the Gryps War. In fact, the conflict between the Titans and AEUG had also been an internal power struggle within the Earth Federation Forces.

However, it was difficult to imagine that Zeon remnants had joined the Earth Federation Forces afterward. Even Char Aznable had followed a similar path.

Char Aznable, who played a key role in AEUG, disappeared after the Gryps War. Various rumors circulated about him. There were rumors that he had already died or that he had joined Axis and was working to rebuild Zeon.

Similarly, it was unlikely that Gabriel Zola had joined the Earth Federation Forces afterward. The possibility of his death in battle also existed.

"First order of business then," Conrad concluded, locking eyes with Joanna, who nodded in agreement, "is to find out where Gabriel Zola is."

"We'll try every angle," Joanna assured.

"Will we have enough time?" Audrey expressed her apprehension.

"We'll make time," Conrad reassured her with a smile.

"I'll see if anyone I know has heard anything about Zola," said Carl.

"I'll ask around on Luna, too," Hendrick chimed in. "King George's intelligence network might have something."

"Report all information to Joanna," Conrad instructed. Carl and Hendrick nodded in acknowledgment.

"But what then?" Carl inquired. "The trial's already dragging on as it is. What are we going to do until Zola is found?"

"We have a few cards to play."

At that moment, Joanna's cellphone rang.

"Excuse me..."

Joanna exited the living room, likely to converse with someone she doesn't want overheard. She returns shortly, her face tightened.

"That was from Ryou Kirishima," Conrad states.

"Kirishima? Ah, the writer who contributed to Michael Chang's tabloid?"

"Yes. He says he was attacked by the military."

"Attacked?"

"Military MPs, apparently. They suddenly showed up at his residence. He managed to escape, and they even fired shots after him."

Conrad is stunned.

"Shots fired? You can't be serious."

"Furthermore, he was pursued by a military helicopter on the highway, resulting in a collision. The chopper crashed on the freeway, and Kirishima's car also got wrecked."

Conrad flips on the TV, tuning into a 24-hour news channel. After several news items, the helicopter crash on the highway is reported. A military spokesperson expresses regret for causing disruption to traffic.

"That's strangely light coverage for such an incident," Conrad says. "They're under the military's thumb, no question. It looks like Kirishima wasn't lying."

"He said he was very close to being killed."

"They probably intended to get rid of him for good."

"Do you think Commander Jeffrey Portman is behind this?"

"Who knows..." Conrad ponders. "There's no shortage of factions within the military who'd be happy to silence a critical journalist."

"True," Hendrick chimes in. "Being under military surveillance in the moon's lowest levels, it's quite plausible to us."

"Kirishima mentioned that we'll likely be in danger sooner or later."

"Let them try," Conrad realizes he's smiling. "They'd be digging their own graves. Now, time's of the essence. We need to find Gabriel Zola as soon as possible."

"I have concerns," Joanna interjects.

"What is it?"

"The movements of Axis."

Conrad thinks deeply. As Joanna has indicated, the military has already sensed the activities of Axis, who have recently sent an advance team in June to Earth. Their activities are getting noticeably more active.

Joanna continues. "There's intel that Axis has started calling themselves Neo Zeon. They might be gearing up for a serious move toward the revival of Zeon."

"I see... In that case, naturally, the inhabitants of the former Principality will flock to Axis. Which means, Gabriel Zola also..."

"The likelihood is high. If so, finding Zola becomes exponentially more difficult."

"Right. However, there's also the possibility that not everyone in the former Principality of Zeon military holds a favorable view of Haman Khan.

But let's not fret over things we can't resolve yet. For now, we focus on finding Gabriel Zola."

Joanna got to work immediately. Carl, Audrey, and Hendrick also begin collecting information, making phone calls and sending emails.

Phone calls and emails carried the risk of being intercepted by the Earth Federation Forces, so everyone was cautious about the content of their communications. Joanna is well-versed in this kind of work, and Carl and the others, under Earth Federation Forces' surveillance, have learned to be equally careful.

Although it was already well past midnight, nobody had any intention of sleeping. Conrad needed to consider his next moves carefully. The prosecution is keen on raising the two primary charges against him as soon as possible. But doing so will be a double-edged sword for them. If they pursued Erhard's act of desertion during the Colony Laser Conflict, they would inevitably have to reveal the reasons behind it.

And if the reason was the unauthorized destruction of a new weapon, they would have to touch upon what that new weapon was.

The Earth Federation Forces' goal was to erase anything connected to the Titans, which included the Gundam. The prosecution understood this well, so for now, they were being cautious. However, they wouldn't procrastinate forever.

Commodore Milkhov, who acted as the presiding officer similar to a judge in a regular trial, seemed to be rushing the verdict.

It's time, Conrad thought. He needed to buy more time. He was contemplating his strategies.

July 0086
Kamchatka Base

"Do you have the plan down?"

Captain Murphy's voice pierced the air.

"Acknowledged," Carl responded, "We just wait inside the space shuttle, right?"

"Exactly. Stay put, and you'll be back in space before you know it."

Eliard and Carl were in the process of boarding the space shuttle. The Hazel Custom and Rosette, with their atmospheric combat equipment removed, had already been loaded into the shuttle's cargo bay.

The assault on the Kamchatka base had gone well up until this point with the Fiver, Hazel Custom, and Rosette trio. However, the operation had a significant flaw. If they failed to secure the base, they had nowhere to retreat to. Even though the mobile suits had dramatically improved operational time compared to older generations, they weren't designed for standalone deployment.

Being stranded was as tragic as aircraft unable to return to their carriers.

Even after securing the base, they were forced to remain. The launched Fivers couldn't return to their original base on their own.

To bring back the Fiver and its wingmen required extensive transportation means, leaving no option but to dispatch something on the level of a Garuda-class transporter.

Such a move would be costly, and specialized teams would be essential for retrieval. Carl, ever the cynic, dubbed this ballistic missile strategy as the "kamikaze attack ."It seemed like the ultimate tactic if one considered a suicide mission.

If one plans not to retrieve, it's inevitably a tactic assuming a kamikaze approach. Upon hearing Carl's joke, Eliard felt uneasy.

Thus, having taken the Kamchatka base, Carl and the rest were stranded there. Moving the mobile suits to the Nevada base would be grossly inefficient.

In the end, Murphy's team was set to return to space from the Kamchatka base. Surprisingly, a hidden facility for launching shuttles was found. Without it, they would've had to call a Garuda-class transport or return to space using a shuttle attached to the Garuda.

"The enemy must know our moves by now," Murphy continued. "A shuttle is entirely vulnerable when launching into space. It's plausible they'll target that."

The Fiver could exit the atmosphere on its own and wasn't aboard the shuttle. Initially, the plan was to load the Fiver onto the shuttle, but Commander Murphy vehemently objected. He insisted they couldn't launch unarmed.

"It might be Murphy's intuition," Eliard pondered, the intuition of a warrior who'd survived countless battles.

Suddenly, alarms blared.

"What's happening?" Murphy asked the control officer.

"An Asshimar and three Nemos are approaching. Probably a Karaba unit from the Kamchatka base trying to retake it."

As expected. Just as Lieutenant Murphy predicted.

"Commander, I'm going out," Eliard impulsively declared, heading to the cargo bay where Hazel Custom was loaded.

"Hold on," Murphy instructed. "I'll buy time. In the meantime, launch into space."

"But..."

"Protect the vital machinery. Go ahead and wait back at the Izmir."

The moment Commander Murphy sortied, enemy gunfire erupted.

The shuttle launch facility used a rail system, somewhat like a scaled-down mass driver built into a mountainside, to launch shuttles via catapult, leaving the shuttle exposed on the ground, vulnerable to enemy beams at any moment.

The pilots had turned pale. They might be Earth Federation soldiers, but they likely only had experience in transport missions.

The Fiver stood between the enemy and the shuttle. Eliard could see its I-field visibly deflected the enemy beams.

"We can't launch yet?" Carl impatiently asked the pilot.

"Just thirty more seconds, please."

Eliard, trying to keep track of Murphy's moves, was craning his neck to gaze outside.

"What immense power..."

Gabriel Zola watched the enemy's actions, utterly astounded by the mobile weapon the Titans referred to as "Fiver." It was something between a mobile suit and a mobile armor.

It might appear an intermediary weapon, but its thrust was off the charts.

"However," Gabriel Zola murmured, "In dogfights, that power would become a hindrance."

The Asshimar's flight performance within the atmosphere was extremely high, primarily its agility. From his experience, Zola believed agility should be prioritized over power in battle.

He firmly believed they had the upper hand in aerial combat compared to those aboard the Base Jabber, piloted by Nemo and his team. While space battles had their nuances, they were gradually adapting to skirmishes within the earth's atmosphere.

"We will reclaim the Kamchatka base," Zola declared, a steely resolve in his eyes. "We won't let the Titans have their way."

The movements of the Karaba's Nemo unit were not entirely unfavorable. Within Karaba's ranks were seasoned warriors, and rumors whispered that several members from the famed White Base crew had joined their forces. As this thought simmered, a shuttle catapult ignited in the distance, a harbinger of the battle that lay ahead.

"Think they can just leave?"

Zola maneuvered to block their path with swift determination, firing a few rounds from his rifle as a distraction before transforming his Asshimar into mobile suit mode.

"Damn it, we're outnumbered..." Eliard muttered, assessing the fragmentary view of the battle unfolding before him through the small cockpit window.

"And the Asshimar, it has a smaller turning radius," Carl analyzed, "Being in the atmosphere means we're at the mercy of aerodynamics. Our Fiver, which relies heavily on sheer power, might be at a disadvantage here."

"If it comes to it, I'm going in," Eliard declared, his voice echoing with a tone of finality.

Carl shook his head vehemently, "Leave it to the Commander. He's fighting to get us into space."

"But that's exactly why I have to help..."

"The commander told us to protect these valuable machines at all costs," Carl reminded him, his voice firm and unyielding. "We're a test team. Our priority is the data stored in these machines' computers. Remember that."

Eliard's voice caught in his throat, the weight of Carl's words bearing down on him. Indeed, their mission was paramount, and Murphy was risking his life fighting fiercely on the battlefield. The Asshimar managed to flank the Fiver, zooming towards the shuttle. In a swift movement, it transformed into a mobile suit in mid-air, displaying agility and prowess.

"The catapult's thrust is increasing," the pilot reported urgently, the situation escalating with each passing second. "We'll skip the countdown. We'll launch at the controller's signal."

"Do it right," Carl urged, his voice steady amidst the chaos. "Don't worry about the enemy."

"Hmph, if you thought Fiver's power was this limited, you're sorely mistaken," Murphy retaliated, forcefully ejecting the Fiver unit. Explosives obliterated the outer casing, revealing its true form - the Gaplant Hrairoo.

"This machine was created thanks to the experiments with the Hazel and Shield Booster," Murphy mused to himself, effortlessly piloting the Gaplant Hrairoo with a seasoned grace. "They are sibling units, machines I'm thoroughly acquainted with."

As the Gaplant Hrairoo showcased its agility, the movements of the Nemos atop the Base Jabber lagged in comparison. Murphy struck them down with his beam rifle or sent them crashing to the ground with a body blow. The Asshimar, in its mobile suit form, engaged in a fierce dogfight, and Murphy responded in kind, showcasing his prowess and dominance.

Suddenly, orange flames and white smoke burst forth from the catapult cradling the shuttle, mirroring the flames and smoke billowing from the shuttle's boosters. The shuttle surged along the steep rails of the catapult, quickly ascending and disappearing into the sky, leaving a trail of white smoke in its wake.

"I'll follow soon with this Hrairoo. Just wait."

The Asshimar swiftly retreated.

Murphy watched its movements on his monitor, murmuring to himself.

July 0088
United Front

Having been ambushed by a military helicopter on the highway, Ryou Kirishima barely made it to the woods to take cover. He suspected they would be on his heels shortly.

If the military's special units come after him, hiding in the forest would be futile. Armed with night vision scopes and infrared sensors, they'd easily track him down. Living near the base and having the military as a source of his journalistic endeavors, Kirishima was all too familiar with such tactics. While the mobile suit units often overshadowed the Earth Federation Ground Forces special forces, they comprised some of the best soldiers.

With fewer localized battles and the shift of the conflict to space, the spotlight fell on space fleets and mobile suits. Yet, at its core, war always came back to the infantry. Kirishima knew this well, which is why he dared not make a move. Hunger gnawed at him, and thirst parched his throat, yet he remained hidden within the hollow of a large tree.

Military vehicles gave chase and opened fire, even deploying a helicopter for support on the highway. It seemed like a major accident had occurred. Fleeing was all Kirishima could manage, with no room to glance back. Still, the highway was alight as if it were day. Clearly, helicopter fuel had ignited.

"I'll stay put till that blaze dies down," Kirishima decided, clutching his knees, pondering his next move.

New Carson was a town dominated by the Nevada base. Almost everyone in the town was affiliated with the base. Many local businesses catered to the base residents, and craftsmen and workers for the base infrastructure formed a major part of the town's populace.

Escaping the military's grasp in New Carson seemed impossible. Perhaps relocating was the solution. Fortunately, he had his wallet and cards. Sparse as its contents were, he could afford a bus or train ticket to another town.

He was hesitant to use his card in this town, fearing military surveillance. The moment he used his credit card, his location might be compromised.

"Perhaps I should move to another town and lay low? Is that my only option?" Kirishima pondered.

It would be all too easy for the military to silence a freelance journalist like him. Soldiers are trained to kill, after all. He'd rather not be on the receiving end. He'd find work elsewhere. The Gryps War had just ended, and there

was a shortage of young men for labor. Jobs would be aplenty if he wasn't picky.

Yet, living in constant fear of the military shadow?

This thought made him furious. What right did the Earth Federation Forces have? Are those engaged in war superior beings?

The Gryps War was originally an internal power struggle within the Earth Federation Forces. To ordinary citizens like him, the Titans and AEUG were just two sides of the same coin. The media portrayed the Titans as a gang of villains and the AEUG as a democratic independence movement fighting for Spacenoid rights.

But the reality was different. Even the AEUG had hidden motives tied to major corporations. Kirishima knew this well as a journalist. Indeed, during the Gryps War, certain massive corporations, like those in the arms industry, profited greatly.

War required sacrifices. The Titans were being used as scapegoats, citing the excesses of their leadership as justification for their execution. While it was true that the higher echelons of the Titans were corrupt, not all of the Titans were the same.

They hunted down remnants of Zeon and suppressed movements against the Earth Federation government. Only the negative aspects were emphasized, but originally, they had been an elite force organized for post-One Year War order restoration, starting with the Delaz Conflict. The young officers should have been full of hope and ideals.

After the Gryps War, the Earth Federation Forces' high command labeled the Titans as the bad guys. To maintain order, the scapegoat had to be executed. That was the reasoning of the current Earth Federation Forces.

He couldn't joke about this. Kirishima thought. It was a war, after all. Who was truly the villain? The side that killed the most was the righteous one. Justice was on the side of the victor. That was the essence of war, wasn't it? Then, the Titans fought the right kind of war.

Kirishima couldn't accept the way both the upper echelons of the Titans and the current Earth Federation Forces operated.

"Move to another town? Find a new job and live quietly? Live in fear while tiptoeing around the military?"

Ridiculous.

"No," Kirishima thought, "I didn't write that article to become a defeated dog. I knew the risks."

As time passed and the immediate fear subsided, his anger at the Earth Federation Forces grew. And it soon became clear what he had to do.

He dialed Joanna on his cell. The military might be monitoring, but he didn't care. Pinpointing his cell location would take time, and he intended to move swiftly.

Updating Joanna on his situation was reassuring. Just hearing her voice bolstered his resolve. She too was fighting her own battles. He couldn't back down now. Ending the call, he felt rejuvenated.

Dragging his aching body, Kirishima moved through the woods. It was an artificial one, originally planted around the Nevada base built in the desert. As the city of New Carson developed around it, roads expanded, highways connected, and an extensive afforestation project followed. Emerging from the woods, he saw arid land stretching ahead, with the town and the vast Nevada base looming in the distance.

Kirishima cautiously ventured into downtown. Every fiber of his being ached, and fatigue weighed him down heavily. Hunger gnawed at his insides, and his throat felt parched to extremes.

He entered a fast-food joint and ordered a mineral water. He drained the glass quickly, asking for another. After devouring a hamburger, he finally felt a semblance of humanity return.

Exiting the diner and moving to an alley, he dialed Michael Chang.

"Why do you always call at these ungodly hours?"

Michael Chang's voice betrayed his irritation, a common undertone.

"You're aware of the highway crash?"

"The one with the military chopper? Serves them right."

"It collided with my car."

A pregnant pause followed.

"Have you single-handedly declared war?"

"Something like that. But I can't say much; don't know who might be listening in."

"Don't underestimate the military. You should assume they've been listening to this conversation for a while now."

"I need to meet somewhere we can talk."

"Impossible. I've got the army tailing me, too. Just surveillance for now... but after that public spectacle, it's not surprising."

"Then, print my piece."

"You're asking me to tread even riskier waters?"

"It'll pay."

"Hmm. The papers are indeed selling like hotcakes. New Carson is a base town, and this proves just how fed up everyone in New Carson is with the Earth Federation Forces."

"I'll email the manuscript."

"If they get to me, I won't be able to publish it."

"Just stay alive. I intend to do the same."

"To tell you the truth..."

"What?"

"I've been waiting for your piece. A follow-up story will sell even more papers. Even the military can't censor that."

"I'll send it tonight."

With that, Kirishima hung up.

Ever since the army had knocked on his door, he had intended to document everything. Their modus operandi was akin to a raid in the dead of night. The truth behind the helicopter crash on the highway would be something the public would be eager to read.

He needed to lay low. He still had enough for a night at a cheap hotel. But caution was paramount. The military could be informed immediately by the hotel staff.

Instead, Kirishima headed towards a church in the city center. The church provided meals and temporary shelter for the homeless. That would be his safest bet.

Despite it being the middle of the night, the volunteers at the church were kind to Kirishima. A young man, appearing thin and timid, greeted him.

"We have some soup and bread," he offered.

Kirishima politely declined, stating only a place to sleep was needed. The young man smiled gently, "Right this way."

On the church grounds stood a prefab hut with bunk beds lined up, reminiscent of military barracks. The blankets were certainly military issue. They were probably surplus items from the military.

The young man led him to an available bed. After expressing his gratitude, Kirishima settled on the bottom bunk.

Taking out his cell phone, a smartphone doubling as a palm computer, he began drafting his manuscript. An integrated holographic keyboard projected onto his pillow. He began typing. His fingers moved faster than his thoughts. The fury against the Earth Federation Forces ignited once again. He wasn't writing to please Joanna anymore; he was writing for himself.

One shouldn't waver when pursuing justice. Doubting one's actions is not an option. For the first time, Kirishima felt genuinely allied with Joanna in their shared fight.

Despite his exhaustion, his mind was sharp. Passion coursed through his veins. In about two hours, he finished the manuscript, did a few revisions, and sent it to Michael Chang's mobile.

Neither Michael Chang's office nor home computers could be trusted. With the army as an adversary, even the internet wasn't safe. Although mobile phones weren't entirely secure, personal media felt somewhat more reliable.

Michael Chang was a crafty man. As long as he had his mobile, Kirishima believed he'd find a way. That was his only option.

Once the manuscript was sent, exhaustion consumed Kirishima as he slumped onto the bed. Pain coursed through his body. He whispered to himself, reassuring that this physical pain was nothing compared to the torment of his soul.

CHAPTER.06

August 0087
Izmir

Eliard felt that the mobile suit deck of the Izmir had suddenly become cramped. A new squad's arrival doubled the number of mobile suits.

Originally designed to carry six mobile suits, the Izmir had only housed Murphy's squad until now, so in terms of current actual combat deployment, it was now finally at standard capacity.

The mechanics, Jonathan and Rachel, were particularly enthusiastic about this.

The battle between the Titans and the AEUG was intensifying. Murphy's squad, originally a test unit, had been integrated into the combat forces.

During the battle of Kamchatka, there had been a change in the registration of the suits brought on board. Commander Murphy was officially assigned to pilot the Gaplant Hrairoo. Eliard was registered as the pilot of the Hazel Custom, and Carl was assigned to the Advanced Hazel. Audrey was set to pilot support units flexibly.

Right now, they were in the midst of briefing for a new operation. Commander Enrique Hammond, the executive officer, explained the operation.

"Our target is the AEUG's Rosa Gigantia. As you know, the Rosa Gigantia is a La Vie en Rose-class dock ship. It's in an elliptical orbit around Earth, slightly intersecting lunar orbit. The intersection is right between the sector of space near Confeito and Zedan's Gate. The Izmir will depart from Confeito, swing by Earth, and rendezvous with the Rosa Gigantia on the same orbit. The rendezvous is in three days."

Any spacecraft operating in space must be in an orbit around a celestial body or something with similar mass. Most of the navigation relies on inertial travel, using the gravity of these bodies. Even battleships use propellants, just like mobile suits. Propellants are limited, so battleship operations are based on precise orbital calculations.

Hammond's briefing continued, "Murphy's squad will lead the attack. The second squad will deploy to prepare for enemy counterattacks. Any questions?"

Capturing the AEUG dock ship, a thorn in the Titans' side between Confeito and the Gate of Zedan, promised a significant strategic advantage.

Carl raised his hand, "It would be great if we could capture it, but what if we can't?"

"Plan B is to destroy the Rosa Gigantia," was the response.
"Understood."
The briefing ended.

"Murphy team, move out!"
The commander's voice echoed through the headset.
Leading the sortie, Murphy's Gaplant Hrairoo blasted off with impressive thrust, followed by Eliard in the Hazel Custom. Next came Carl in the sniper-equipped Advanced Hazel, with Audrey in the Hrududu following.
"Second squad, move out."
The second squad was led by a Marasai with two Hi-Zacks.
"Second squad, flank left and right."
Murphy responded, "Understood. We're going in. Audrey, provide support from the rear with the Hrdudu."
Yes, sir."
The Hrairoo's acceleration was breathtaking, leaving Eliard and Carl scrambling to keep pace.
"Here they come," announced Murphy. "It's the Rosa Gigantia's mobile suit team."
Carl identified the enemy, "One Rick Dias and two Nemos."
"Fire, Carl. That's what the sniper equipment is for," urged Murphy.
"Understood."
At Murphy's command, Carl's long-range rifle fired, disrupting the enemy formation.
"Only three enemies?" inquired the leader of the second squad. "This will be a piece of cake."
Eliard thought they had the advantage in both numbers and mobile suit performance.
"Wait..." Carl's voice trailed off, catching Murphy's attention.
"What's up?"
"On the same orbit, behind the Rosa Gigantia. There's something else... Commander, it's a Zanzibar."
"An escort ship... Looks like they won't make this easy for us."
Carl added, "Three more mobile suits confirmed, coming from the Zanzibar. Another Rick Dias and two Nemos, both carrying large weapons. Probably beam cannons."
"Target those, Carl. We can't let them fire at will."
"Understood."
Carl's Advanced Hazel continuously fired its long-range rifle as the enemy returned fire with their beam cannons.
"Wow..." Eliard couldn't help but exclaim.
"That's like a battleship's beam cannon."
"Move," ordered the leader of the second squad.
"Don't make yourself an easy target."
A long-range firefight ensued.

Gabriel Zola grew fond of the Rick Dias, drawn to its unparalleled versatility. He sensed the echoes of Zeon technology within it.

Zola's role was to protect the Rosa Gigantia. But as he caught sight of the enemy on his monitor, a slight smile crossed his face.

"As I thought..." Zola murmured. "If there were any ships fighting on a different front than the main battlefield on the Moon, it had to be them."

On the monitor, unmistakably, were two Gundams.

"Enough fooling around," Zola declared. "Is the Titans' pride and symbol of the Earth Federation going to be tarnished by their own hands? Aren't Gundams supposed to be unique?"

Zola, accelerating with his thrusters, moved forward. Communication came from the Nemo with the beam cannon.

"Commander, if you get too close, we can't make full use of the beam cannon."

"Relying on heavy weaponry compromises the inherent mobility of mobile suits. Why don't you get that?"

Leaving the two Nemos behind, Zola boldly advanced.

"Be careful," warned Murphy. "Don't let the movements of that black Rick Dias throw you off."

The squadron leader's Hrairoo moved forward to engage the Rick Dias in a dogfight.

Around them, the battle between the Nemos and Hizacks had begun. Eliard was trying to target the Rosa Gigantia's Rick Dias in his scope.

Beams intersected in a brilliant explosion of light. It was unclear who had been hit. Eliard repeatedly fired his beam rifle at the Rick Dias.

At this rate, reaching the Rosa Gigantia seemed impossible. Eliard looked around. The second squad's units were already drawn into dogfights of their own.

In this situation, Carl's long-range rifle couldn't be fully effective. The Hrairoo and the black Rick Dias were engaged in a fierce, close-range battle.

"Carl," Eliard called out. "Move forward. We need to get to the Rosa Gigantia."

"I know."

As Carl's unit moved forward, Eliard noticed the movement of a Nemo in the enemy's rear.

"I need to cover Carl..." As if sensing his intent, Audrey's Hrdudu began firing its long blade rifle.

Eliard's unit shuddered from an impact. It seemed he'd been hit. He quickly checked the monitor. No major damage.

Just as Eliard prepared to counterattack, a blinding light engulfed his monitor.

"What's that?"

"Carl!" Audrey shouted. At that moment, Eliard realized what had happened. It was the Nemo's beam cannon. Carl's Advanced Hazel had been hit.

"Carl's been... taken out?"

Eliard stared in disbelief at the expanding ball of light.

August 0087
Elliptical Orbit

In the vacuum where light once danced, the remnants of the Advanced Hazel, now silent and battered, emerged into view, its once formidable presence quashed by the merciless barrage of beam cannon's charged particles.

"Carl, are you there?" Eliard called into the void, his voice carrying the weight of hope and dread alike. Silence answered him, a stark reminder of the possibility that a direct hit could have melted even the cockpit, vaporizing Carl into nothingness.

"Carl," came the steady voice of Commander Murphy, cutting through the tension. "Report your status."

Despite the calm in his tone, the undercurrent of shock was palpable. The battle raged on around them, with Eliard now aiming to bring down the Nemo, the wielder of the beam cannon that had halted Carl in his tracks. Though vengeance was not his primary drive, the pilot's instinct to protect and to survive prevailed. Leaving the beam cannon operational meant risking the same fate as Carl.

"There it is..."

A shimmering point moving through the vastness of space, the sunlight reflecting off the mobile suit's frame, turning it into a beacon of hope and dread. The monitor switched to target scope mode, zeroing in on Nemo. Lock-on. "Die, damn you!"

Eliard's fingers danced over the controls, unleashing a volley from the beam rifle. The Nemo was engulfed in a silent explosion of light.

"Light signal detected from Carl's unit," Audrey's voice broke through, a glimmer of hope amidst despair. The blinking mono-eye atop Carl's damaged Hazel was a distress signal, a beacon in the dark signaling life amidst the wreckage.

"He's alive but immobile," Murphy confirmed. "Since the Hrairoo has the highest acceleration, I'll bring him back. Cover us during the rescue."

"Audrey unit, acknowledged."

"Hunter unit, acknowledged."

Acknowledgments came swiftly, a testament to the squadron's unity and resolve. The Hrairoo darted towards Carl's Advanced Hazel, its engines blazing a trail of high-temperature gas.

"Fall back, Audrey," Eliard ordered. "It's impossible for the Hrududu to engage in a dogfight."

"Understood," came the reply, and with that, Audrey's Hrududu retreated from the frontlines. The most perilous part of any battle is the retreat, a fact Audrey was acutely aware of.

As Murphy escorted Carl's unit back to Izmir, he was firing off the long-blade rifle with thrusters from the front and Audrey made her return, Eliard found himself the sole guardian left in the fray. The second team still had their leader's unit. It was unclear whether the other units had been destroyed or had returned.

The Marasai, the second team leader's unit, was approaching the Rosa Gigantia. The enemy's counterattack was beyond expectations. Capturing the Rosa Gigantia was impossible.

The squad leader was preparing to execute Plan B—destroying the Rosa Gigantia. Eliard activated his thrusters to synchronize with this movement. It would be impossible to destroy it with just one Marasai.

Suddenly, Eliard's path was blocked by the imposing silhouette of a black Rick Dias. It was a mobile suit squad from Zeon escorting the Rosa Gigantia. This black Rick Dias was evidently the leader's unit.

"Don't interfere..."

Eliard fired, but the Rick Dias effortlessly dodged, seeking to flank him.

In a ballet of thrusters and gunfire, Eliard maneuvered the Hazel Custom, now a seasoned veteran of countless battles, as if it were an extension of his own body. Then, an unexpected call pierced the silence.

"Gundam pilot," the voice of Gabriel Zola, the enemy, cutting through the frequency reserved for Izmir's mobile suit squadron. Despite the ban on communication with the enemy, the voice struck a chord with Eliard.

"Are you Captain Wes Murphy or Lieutenant Eliard Hunter?"

Zola's inquiry brought a moment of hesitation. Engaging in conversation could buy the second squadron leader precious time.

"This is Lieutenant Hunter. Lieutenant Gabriel Zola, I presume?" Eliard responded, aware of the stakes.

"One must be prepared for certain realities when piloting a Gundam," came the reply, a tone of challenge threading through the words.

"The pride of the Earth Federation Forces, a symbol of victory. I'm well aware," Eliard retorted, his voice steady.

"That's not enough."

"And what more is required?"

"As long as you pilot a Gundam, know this: pilots like me will never cease to hunt you down."

"I wouldn't have it any other way," Eliard shot back, his resolve clear.

"I respect that spirit."

Zola acknowledged, before making the first move. Positioning his Rick Dias with the sun at its back—a fundamental tactic in combat, where visual confirmation often outweighed radar during a dogfight.

"Damn ghost of Zeon..." Eliard muttered, pushing his Hazel Custom to its limits, thrusters firing in every direction. The G-forces, both positive and negative, nearly caused him to black out, his pride and sense of duty as a Gundam pilot the only things keeping him conscious.

"You move too much, Gundam," Zola taunted, his beam rifle striking unexpectedly from below.

The Hazel Custom was hit.

A quick check revealed damage to the left leg; one of the thrusters was now inoperable.

"I'm not done yet," Eliard murmured, his focus unshaken as he locked onto the Rick Dias's rapid movements. He reminded himself of the difference from his days as a recruit.

"Where are you looking?"

Another beam struck, this time hitting the right arm. The damage was significant but not decisive. A direct hit was all that was needed for victory. Eliard was prepared to exchange blows if necessary.

Continuously firing his rifle as a feint, Eliard checked his energy levels. He predicted a single opportunity would present itself. There was no room to worry about the Rosa Gigantia; that responsibility fell to second team's leader.

Then Zola made his move. A beam tore through the chest armor of Eliard's unit at the moment he locked onto his target through the targeting scope.

"Hit him!" Eliard breathed, firing his beam rifle.

The shot was true, piercing Zola's Rick Dias, which exploded into a ball of fire.

Almost simultaneously, an explosion was visible in the engine section of the Rosa Gigantia, attacked by the team leader's Marasai.

Eliard was already on his return course, soon joined by second team's leader. "Hazel Custom, are you okay?" the squadron leader's voice came through.

"I'm fine. There's no risk of chain explosion," Eliard replied, knowing Zola hadn't pursued. His shot hadn't been a direct hit, but it had destroyed the large binder unique to the Rick Dias.

As the battle concluded, concern for Carl began to surface.

"This is Lieutenant Hunter. Izmir?"

"This is Izmir."

"I'd like an update on Lieutenant Matsubara's condition."

There was a pause, during which worry mounted. Then, the communication resumed.

"Turns out, I'm just naturally lucky," Carl's voice came through, bringing relief to Eliard.

"Lieutenant Hunter, preparing to land."

"I'll be waiting on the mobile suit deck."

Though they hadn't managed to take down the Rosa Gigantia, it would likely be out of commission for a while. The operation could be considered a success, at least for now.

July 0088
United Front II

Kirishima was jolted awake by voices quarreling in the dead of night, a mental alarm blaring.

As a freelance journalist, caution had become second nature, but having been targeted for assassination had honed his vigilance to an almost paranoid edge.

The kind of caution that bordered on cowardice was essential, the tougher the job got. The best journalists were always careful, especially those who ventured into dangerous conflict zones, hungering for detailed information beforehand. The reckless ones tended to lose their lives without achieving anything.

Someone was arguing at the door. Slipping out of bed, Kirishima surveyed the room for another exit. The only escape was through the window. He approached the window farthest from the entrance and peeked outside. The beams of flashlights danced around; he could see figures dressed in night camouflage combat gear.

Earth Federation soldiers. They weren't just standing by; they were actively searching for him. He had forgotten that even without making a call, his mobile phone's signal could give away his location. The constant, weak radio waves it emitted could be traced by the service provider. Regret washed over him for not having turned it off.

The motel was undoubtedly surrounded by Earth Federation soldiers. Escape through the window was now impossible. They weren't just trying to capture him; they wanted him dead. The odds of shaking them off seemed bleak.

Is this the end?

Kirishima stood frozen in the dark, biting his lip.

Is my fight over here? I wanted to cause the Earth Federation Forces a bit more trouble.

The only consolation was the article he'd sent to Michael Chan. If anyone could make something of it, it was Chan.

The reality of being killed didn't sink in. It was just terrifying. He couldn't bring himself to accept it.

The voices at the door grew louder.

"Move aside. If you obstruct our work, we'll detain you too."

The soldiers were trying to search the motel, and someone was attempting to stop them.

Kirishima listened more closely.

"This is a house of God," a calm voice said. "People come here to find peace that God has granted. No one is allowed to disturb God's sanctuary."

"Are you opposing the Federation Forces?"

"If you are soldiers, then we are soldiers of God."

Soldiers of God... Kirishima knew a certain religious order was referred to that way. The voice belonged to the church's priest.

"Move aside now."

"So you will shoot me? Very well. But know that by doing so, you're pointing your guns at every parish and the Vatican through me. If you have the courage to make enemies of us all, then go right ahead."

Silence followed. Then the soldiers spoke again.

"Let's try somewhere else."

Their parting words hung in the air.

"Father, don't think this is the end of it."

The sound of their retreating footsteps reached Kirishima, and soon, the cars drove off, their engines fading into the night.

Kirishima exhaled deeply, slumping to the floor.

"Hey..."

A voice emerged from the darkness. He could tell several men were holding their breaths nearby. They were the homeless staying in the motel.

"Are you running from the police?" The speaker was a bearded, long-haired Caucasian man.

"Not the police. The Earth Federation Forces."

"You've made enemies with the military? How did that happen?"

"I'm a freelance journalist. The military doesn't like it when the truth is written about them."

The man stepped closer to Kirishima.

"Are you involved with Michael Chan's newspaper?"

"I write articles for Michael's paper."

"So, you're the one who wrote that article? About the judge advocate's house being attacked by Federation soldiers?"

"I only wrote about rumors circulating online."

"Can you contact him?"

"I know his secretary," Kirishima realized staying any longer would only bring trouble to the church and the motel.

He moved past the homeless man and headed for the door, where the priest was standing. An older man with white hair, the priest appeared far more aged than Kirishima had expected. Despite his age, his jaw was set in determination.

"Father," Kirishima said, "I'm sorry for the trouble. The Earth Federation Forces are after me."

The priest's stern gaze was clear even in the darkness.

"It doesn't matter who they're after. I won't let them harm a bird that has flown into my care."

"I'm no bird, but thank you."

"Where will you go?"

"I have no particular place in mind, but staying here will only cause you more trouble..."

"Don't worry about it. Even the Earth Federation Forces can't afford to make enemies of churches around the world."

"I hope you're right..."

Kirishima could feel the increasing power of the Earth Federation Forces. They were under the Earth Federation government, supposed to be under civilian control. But history had shown that war could enhance military power, making a mockery of such principles. The Gryps War had practically wiped out the Titans, strengthening the relative authority of the Earth Federation Forces and their influence over the government.

"Anyway..." Kirishima said, "I'll leave now. They'll come back. It's better if I disappear."

The priest shrugged.

"I won't stop you. But if it gets dangerous, you're always welcome to seek refuge here. God will protect you."

In other words, the organizational strength and voice of the church would offer protection.

"Thank you. I won't forget this kindness."

"Then make sure to survive to remember it. May God bless you."

The priest returned to the church, his figure imposing even in retreat. Kirishima began to move away in the dark when a voice called from behind.

"That judge advocate... was he defending a former Titans pilot at a court-martial?"

Turning, he saw the homeless man from before.

"Why are you interested?"

"I've got a tip. Interested?"

"What kind of tip?"

"Wasn't that guy piloting a Gundam?"

"The Earth Federation Forces don't seem to acknowledge that the Titans had Gundams..."

"I know someone closely involved with that pilot."

Kirishima was skeptical. It was hard to believe homeless man living in New Carson held information about a mobile suit pilot. But it was worth hearing him out. Truth or lies could be sorted later.

"Who is this person you know?"

"Can't say for free. It won't be a loss for you."

"Then forget it. I'm not paying for unverified information." The homeless man pondered for a moment.

"Alright. I'll tell you his background. Where to find him, I'll say after getting paid."

"Suit yourself."

"He was a former Zeon mobile suit pilot who later joined AEUG. In the battle over the colony laser, he directly fought the pilot currently facing court-martial."

"His name?"

"Gabriel Zola."

"What's your relation to this man?"

"I served on Zola's Zanzibar. After that battle over the Colony Laser, the Zanzibar was retired. Only a few officers found a place in the military after the war. The rest of us were discarded, no pension or anything."

It wasn't an unbelievable story. In the military, foot soldiers were expendable. Only a select few from the AEUG and the Earth Federation Forces secured a position post-war. Many former soldiers lost their jobs and were adrift.

"What is Gabriel Zola doing now?"

"Ah, can't tell you that for free. I need money."

"Alright. If I can verify your story, I'll contact you. What's your name?"

"Around here, they call me Joey."

"How can I contact you?"

"I'm always at this church's shelter. Got nowhere else to go."

Kirishima nodded and walked away, Joey's voice echoing, "I'll be waiting for a good response."

Kirishima doubted the existence of Gabriel Zola, suspecting Joey might have fabricated the story. If true, Joey was attempting to monetize information about a former superior. The sadness of that realization weighed on him. The post-war chaos continued.

He couldn't blame Joey; many were struggling to survive. It was a shame that soldiers who had risked their lives were forced into such dire straits.

He navigated the back alleys to avoid Earth Federation patrols, knowing that as long as he was in New Carson, no place was safe. The town was essentially a military base. Though he had managed some rest, his body still ached from the accident. He needed a place to rest properly, to sleep soundly. Perhaps it was time to seek help.

Kirishima took out his mobile phone. Reluctantly, he decided to consult Joanna.

Dialing her number, he hoped for the best.

November 0087
Zanzibar

On the bridge, Earth was displayed on the monitor, a sight that stirred a sense of beauty and nostalgia even in Gabriel Zola, who had been raised in a colony. Currently, the Zanzibar was breaking away from the moon's orbit, heading towards Earth's satellite orbit.

"Gabriel," Kazak Larson called out from the captain's chair, having just received a report from the AEUG main force via radio. "It seems Axis has joined forces with the Titans."

"Hmph..." Zola couldn't help but let out a sarcastic chuckle. "So, the AEUG's envoy mission was a failure..."

"Why would Axis, aiming for Zeon's revival, ally with the Earth-centric Titans? I had thought a coalition with AEUG would have been more beneficial..."

"Haman Karn is that kind of person. She uses Zeon's greater cause for her own benefit, acting cunningly," Zola explained.

"However..." Larson rubbed his chin, looking troubled. "If Axis is siding with the Titans, doesn't this put us at a significant disadvantage in the battle?"

"No need to worry. Haman won't be on the Titans' side forever."

"You mean the Axis-Titans alliance is temporary?"

“Or perhaps just for show..."

"That would be ideal..."

"What about the information from inside the Titans? Is it reliable?"

"I had the support units, including Karaba, confirm it. There's no mistake. The Titans are planning to launch some new weapon into Earth's satellite orbit."

"An insider, then... It means the Titans are beginning to crumble from within..."

"There are those who want the war to end soon. Introducing a new weapon will only prolong the conflict."

"We might experience a victory for the first time. Those running away are hardly a match for us."

"We'll see. The Titans are formidable. The vessel to receive the cargo launched from Earth is the Izmir, a Salamis Kai-class."

Zola nodded.

"The Izmir has a test team. Meaning, there are Gundams there."

"I'm concerned about this new weapon. Even now, the Titans are still developing new armaments."

"While the front-line soldiers are exhausted, the higher-ups want to continue the war."

"We'll make contact with the enemy in three days. Rest up while you can."

"I'll take you up on that. I'm not as young as I used to be."

"We won't have the Rick Dias ready in time. You'll have to go out in a Nemo."

"Any mobile suit will do."

Zola left the bridge, but honestly, he would have preferred a different mobile suit. The Nemo felt too much like it belonged to the Earth Federation Forces.

November 0087
Izmir

"There's a ship orbiting on the same trajectory as ours," Commander Enrique Hammond, the executive officer, informed Eliard and Audrey in the briefing room. "It's the Zanzibar, confirmed to be affiliated with AEUG."

Eliard thought of Gabriel Zola's ship as Hammond continued his briefing.

"Lieutenant Carl Matsubara went to collect a package that will be transferred to our ship along with the shuttle in satellite orbit. It's expected that the Zanzibar will attempt sabotage during this operation. You two will be responsible for preventing any interference from the enemy."

Their team leader Murphy was away on the Aswan, near Confeito, attending a defense strategy meeting in anticipation of an AEUG attack on Confeito. It was up to the two of them to protect the package and Carl. Carl had been injured during the Rosa Gigantia capture operation and had gone down to Earth for treatment. Subsequently, he was assigned the mission to transfer the new weapon.

"The Titans have allied with Axis, who have returned to the Earth Sphere," Audrey mentioned to Hammond. "Why would they align with those plotting Zeon's revival? Does this indicate a pressing situation in the battle?"

"That's for the General Staff to ponder over. Our focus is solely on the battle at hand."

"With the introduction of new weapons at this time, we should assume they will be deployed to the front lines immediately."

"We've been handling tests and actual combat simultaneously up until now. Nothing changes. Just do as we always have," Hammond responded.

Audrey nodded in agreement. "Understood."

"Remember," Hammond added, "during the One Year War and the subsequent Delaz Conflict, Captain Schröder didn't lose a single subordinate. It has become a legend within the Earth Federation Forces. We cannot tarnish that legend. The message is clear: do not die. Concentrate solely on the battle before you. That is your mission."

"Yes, sir," Eliard and Audrey responded in unison.

Eliard was already prepared for this. The AEUG was known for disrupting the Titans from within through various information warfare tactics. Terrorists were adept at psychological warfare as well.

He knew not to be swayed. As Hammond said, the broader strategic situation was for the General Staff to consider. Soldiers like Eliard were to

focus solely on executing the given strategies. In war, there is no right or wrong, only strategy and tactics. Concepts of justice are applied post-conflict.

Victory defines justice.

Exiting the briefing room, Eliard said to Audrey, "Aligning with Axis is purely strategic. Having them as allies allows us to focus more on fighting the AEUG."

"I understand. But Axis is not to be trusted."

"Yes. I'm aware that the outcome of this battle could very well depend on Axis's actions. But don't let that distract us during the operation. Our mission is to secure the new weapon and protect Carl."

"We'll do what needs to be done," Audrey affirmed.

Exactly. Audrey would do what needed to be done. Eliard trusted her on that front.

November 0087
Satellite Orbit Around Earth

Beneath them shimmered the sea and clouds, a vista of blue glow. To the right, Audrey's Hazel-Rah was visible, while Eliard piloted the Gaplant Hrairoo, gathering data on the new equipment. In the absence of Commander Murphy, a temporary registration change had been made for the mobile suits.

Soon, they were to visually confirm a shuttle carrying the new weapon codenamed TR-6. As Eliard focused on the monitor, an urgent communication came from the Izmir.

"On the same orbit, 5,000 behind, Mobile suits identified. Three Nemos, one of which appears to be using a Sub-Flight System."

"Roger that."

Eliard fired the thrusters. Still in mobile suit mode, the acceleration felt like being kicked by a giant, almost overwhelming him with its thrust.

"This one's more of a wild horse than the Hazel Unit 2..."

"Shuttle in sight," Audrey's voice came through.

"Audrey, cover the shuttle from the rear. I'll move forward."

"Understood."

Eliard wrestled with the Gaplant Hrairoo's rollercoaster-like acceleration and response.

"The Flying Armor does have its advantages," Zola muttered to himself. In the orbit-bound skirmish, Zola's unit was utilizing the last Flying Armor left on the Zanzibar as a Sub-Flight System, ensuring survivability in case of atmospheric entry.

"Enemy mobile suits approaching. Two units."

The radio crackled just before beams crossed and a dogfight ensued. The enemy mobile suits moved erratically, but Zola was confident in their numerical advantage and the pressure they could exert.

"Is that the Gaplant? Is the Gundam at the rear?"

Zola was distracted by the Gaplant's maneuvers when a devastating impact hit, prompting a curse from him.

"A long-range cannon from a Gundam... The Flying Armor's been hit..."

Though having the upper hand in numbers, the disparity in mobility was too great.

"Retreat might be the only option..."

Watching the shuttle approach the Salamis Kai-class ship, Zola signaled for retreat, the battle's tide clearly not in their favor.

November 0087
Zanzibar

"Peace efforts?"

Gabriel Zola muttered in disbelief. Kazak Larson, seated in the captain's chair, nodded.

"Yes. It seems that a faction within the Earth Federation government and the Federation Forces is working behind the scenes. The move has accelerated since the Titans allied with Axis."

"It's because they can't afford further casualties, isn't it?" Zola speculated.

"The AEUG's main force has been secretly contacted by them. They're scheming to sever the Titans from the Earth Federation Forces."

"For what purpose?"

"The Titans have gone too far. The moderates within the Earth Federation Forces, fearing a prolonged war, have decided to prevent the introduction of new weapons by the Titans."

"Do the AEUG main forces really believe in verbal promises?"

"The moderate faction within the Earth Federation Forces is reportedly offering to hand over the experimental data for the new weapons the Titans have been working on. You understand what they're referring to as 'new weapons.'"

"Gundams..."

"The Gundam is a symbol of the Earth Federation Forces. There are still conservatives within the Earth Federation Forces who refuse to accept the fact that the Titans have developed Gundams. Handing over the data to AEUG, they want to act as if it never happened."

"Does that mean the Federation Forces are handing over Solomon, where the Gundams were developed, to the AEUG?"

"There's also information that the insider within the Titans is actually a small faction of the Earth Federation Forces' moderates who have defected."

"The ones who leaked the information about the new weapon's transfer."

Larson nodded.

"Exactly. And our Zanzibar volunteered for the mission to recapture Solomon."

"Of course. We have been chasing Gundams all this time."

Larson sighed, suddenly looking melancholy.

"Recapturing Solomon has been our fervent desire. But can it truly be considered a victory if we're simply taking what's been handed to us by the enemy?"

Zola couldn't help but laugh.

"Hey, Kazak. We're no longer with the Zeon forces. The Earth Federation Forces are not our enemies."

"That's not what I'm saying. I thought winning a war would be more thrilling... more visceral."

"I will devote all my efforts to recapturing Solomon. I don't have the luxury to entertain any other thoughts. The enemy is desperate too. Just pray we don't die on the battlefield."

Larson remained somber, his expression still tinged with melancholy.

November 0087
Near Confeito, Onboard the Izmir

Eliard was on standby inside the Hazel Custom on the mobile suit deck. Commander Murphy had already returned from Aswan to the Izmir and was waiting inside the Gaplant Hrairoo.

They had already gleaned intel about the AEUG's attack on Confeito, although the source of the information was unknown. However, it was for this operation's planning meeting that all mobile suit team leaders had been summoned to the Aswan.

The Aswan and Izmir, stationed at Confeito, were already poised to counter the AEUG.

"What the... Can't we launch?" Carl's voice came over the radio, using the ship's internal frequency. Rachel Sand, a mechanic, responded to him.

"We're in the middle of equipping the Hazel Unit 2 with the Primrose..."

"Just take it off!"

"Don't be unreasonable. It doubles as an escape pod."

Carl seemed quite frustrated to know that his mobile suit wouldn't be ready in time for sortie. It was true, Eliard considered, the difference in combat strength with or without Carl was significant.

Carl had become one of Eliard's most trusted comrades, having shared countless meals and survived numerous brushes with death as part of the test team.

"Enemy attack. Six Nemos."

Executive Officer Hammond's voice came through the radio.

"Two squads of Hi-Zacks from the Aswan have already engaged. Murphy unit, Hunter unit, launch."

"Roger."

Hammond continued, "April, you too, get out there in the Hrududu."

It was an effort to compensate for the shortfall in strength due to Carl's absence. To Eliard, Audrey was as reliable a comrade as Carl.

Once outside the Izmir, the battle had already commenced. The enemy Nemos had made contact with the forward-deployed Hi-Zack squads from Aswan. Equipped with Hi-Zack Cannons, the Aswan's squads were not outmatched in firepower.

"Don't overextend," Murphy advised. "This is just the first wave."

"Understood."

The enemy assault concluded in about fifteen minutes. One squad of three Hi-Zacks returned to Aswan for resupply. That's when AEUG's second wave hit: three Nemos and three Rick Diases.

"We're moving forward," Murphy declared. "It's our turn to fight."

Eliard fired the Hazel Custom's main thrusters. Audrey began firing from a distance, seemingly accustomed to fighting in the Hrududu.

Eliard engaged in a dogfight with the Nemos, with Audrey providing cover. After taking down one unit with his beam rifle, the enemy Nemo and Rick Dias units retreated. Their withdrawal was swift.

"The next one will come soon," Murphy warned. The tense moments passed slowly. Another squad of Hi-Zacks returned to Aswan for resupply, replaced by a squad of GM IIIs. This squad consisted of one GM Sniper III and two GM II High Mobility Types.

How reassuring it would have been if Carl had been piloting that GM Sniper III. Eliard fleetingly entertained the thought.

"Has the Rick Dias been refitted on time?" Gabriel Zola asked the mechanic.

"Yes. The winch unit, missile pod, wing binder, shield booster, all have been installed. Please deploy in the Rick Dias Stutzer," the mechanic confirmed.

Zola boarded his mobile suit and launched without waiting for the second wave's return. Two standard Rick Dias units followed suit immediately.

Switching his monitor to telescopic mode, a smile quickly broke on Zola's face. "There you are, Gundam. Prepare to sink in Solomon's seas."

Piloting the enhanced Rick Dias, Zola headed straight for the Gundam.

"Damn this Stutzer. The additional fittings are just in the way, making it harder to maneuver in battle..."

However, the ample missiles proved to be quite handy. He fired missiles and beams towards the Gundam, which, despite its capabilities, couldn't dodge all the attacks. Zola succeeded in destroying the Gundam's beam rifle.

"That movement, that attack pattern," Eliard murmured. "It's Gabriel Zola..."

Without his weapon, Eliard was an easy target, barely able to flee.

"Eliard. Delivery of weapons. Give me your signature," Carl's voice came through. Surprisingly, Carl had brought a beam rifle in nothing more than an escape pod, the Primrose. Once again, Carl had come to his rescue. Armed anew, Eliard was able to rejoin the battlefront.

The third wave of the attack did not last long. Eventually, Zola's Rick Dias squad also retreated. The enemy's wave attacks ended after three rounds, but when they would attack again was unpredictable. They remained on alert, ready for anything.

Seeking a brief respite, Eliard headed to the gun room with Carl, an officers' lounge. There, Audrey and Murphy were engrossed in the monitor screen.

"What's this?"

"The AEUG has taken over Dakar," Audrey explained. "It's a speech by Char Aznable."

Eliard was shocked.

"Char? Char is with the AEUG?"

Char Aznable was denouncing the Titans as if they were some malevolent organization. It seemed utterly misplaced to Eliard.

"What are you talking about?" Carl suddenly interjected. "This is always how Zeon operates."

That single sentence felt like it spoke for all of them. Murphy and Audrey remained silent, their attention fixed on the monitor.

November 0087
Near Confeito, Onboard the Izmir

"An uprising at the base on Confeito..." Eliard found himself echoing Carl's words, disbelief lacing his tone. The two were in the midst of pre-launch decompression.

"Yeah. A wave of resentment towards the Titans among the rank and file of the Earth Federation Forces has erupted. It all started with Char's speech in Dakar."

"No way, man... The enemy is bound to attack soon."

"We're an eyesore to the Earth Federation Forces. The focal point of the conflict is shifting towards Luna and Gryps."

"How could this be..."

"It seems a formal decision on that matter will be announced shortly."

As Eliard was about to respond, an announcement cut through.

"Lieutenant Hunter, Lieutenant Matsubara, please proceed to the mobile suit deck and stand by."

On their way out of the chamber towards the mobile suit deck, Eliard and Carl overheard a heated argument. A navigator and a ship control officer were at each other's throats. Eliard intervened.

"What's going on here? We're in the middle of combat readiness," he stated.

The navigator retorted, "This guy insists Char's speech held truth. Someone like that doesn't deserve to be with the Titans."

The ship control officer shot back, "We must protect the Titans from those who seek to exploit it for personal agendas and selfish gain. We need to correct the Titans' course. For that, even accepting Char's speech is necessary."

Eliard was puzzled. He had believed everyone considered Char's words in Dakar nothing more than an AEUG propaganda stunt.

Carl spoke up, "Whether that speech was a lie or the truth doesn't matter. Until this war ends, we must continue to fight as Titans. That's the only truth. Hesitate, and you'll die on the battlefield. I want no part of that."

The disputing pair, still unsettled, returned to their stations. Eliard mulled over Carl's words in silence, pondering their weight.

"Hey, how's my little Hazel Owsla doing?" Carl inquired as soon as he arrived at the mobile suit deck. Rachel Sand's voice came back in response.

"It's all set for launch whenever you're ready."

"That's what I like to hear."

The Hazel Owsla, affectionately named by Carl, was an Advanced Hazel equipped with a Primrose escape pod as a modification. It also had a prototype mega particle cannon installed.

"However, the preparation for Lieutenant Hunter's Gaplant Unit 2 is running behind schedule."

"What? The enemy will be here any minute."

Jonathan's voice replaced Rachel's, "We're rushing it. Just a little more time needed."

Eliard noticed Audrey's absence on the mobile suit deck.

"Where's Audrey?"

Commander Murphy answered this time, "Audrey has a crucial mission. She's gone to Confeito to dispose of the TR series experimental data."

"Dispose of the experimental data?"

"All data will be stored on the Izmir. Any remaining data at Confeito is to be erased."

Carl interjected, "Does that mean we're abandoning Confeito?"

"Possibly."

"There's been a rebellion among the general soldiers of the Earth Federation Forces at Confeito, right? Is Audrey going there?"

"The rebellion has already been suppressed. The real problem is the enemy's bombardment and missile attacks. If they target the living areas and energy facilities from their ships, even Confeito might not withstand it. That's why we need to gain the upper hand in mobile suit combat to prevent enemy ships from approaching."

That meant the AEUG, which had launched wave attacks previously, would likely come with their full force this time. And yet, the preparation for their mobile suits was delayed. Eliard felt frustrated.

"Listen," Murphy's voice came through, "to ensure Audrey isn't put in danger, do not let the enemy ships get close to Confeito. Give Audrey enough time to complete her task."

November 0087
Near Confeito

Gabriel Zola watched as mobile suits from the Zanzibar and a Salamis Kai-class ship launched one after another. A squad of Nemos, two squads of Rick Dias... Zola was out in his Rick Dias Stutzer, ready to strike at the Titans' mobile suit units being pushed out in a total war effort. Amidst the chaos, the plan was to attack the remnants at Solomon with the battleship's main cannon and large missiles. That would settle the fight.

Zola was in command of the total mobile suit warfare. With this, Solomon would be theirs, and they might even take down some Gundams along the way.

"Let's go," Zola called out to the entire squad. "To Solomon."

The AEUG's mobile suit units accelerated, facing the intercepting enemy ships, the Aswan and Izmir, already deploying their mobile suit units.

"Hmph, only one new model?"

Zola glanced at a new type mobile armor while searching for Gundams. The dogfight had already started, with both sides exchanging rifle fire. He spotted a white unit gleaming against the sun.

"There you are, Gundam."

Zola fired his Rick Dias Stutzer's thrusters, launching a preemptive missile strike followed by rifle fire. The white Gundam, utilizing its mobility, dodged the incoming attacks.

"It won't be that easy..."

Zola was preparing for the next attack with ease.

Carl managed to dodge the missile and rifle attacks before finally getting a clear view of his opponent.

"What's with that guy? Slapping together all sorts of things on the battlefield... Is he sane?"

It hardly looked capable of a dogfight. It seemed to be based on a Rick Dias, but its versatility appeared entirely unutilized to Carl. However, contrary to its appearance, the enemy's movements were swift.

"Not bad..."

Carl found himself increasingly cornered. The mega particle cannon on his right shoulder couldn't be used effectively as the enemy didn't allow for any distance.

"Damn it. Is he just toying with me?"

The cockpit was filled with the sound of a lock-on alarm.

"This is bad..."

Just then, a high-speed mobile armor crossed the monitor.

"The Hrairoo... Eliard?"

"I'm returning the favor from last time."

"You're too kind."

"Leave the mobile suits to me. Use your shoulder mega particle cannon on the battleship."

"Got it."

The energy charge took a moment. During that time, Eliard provided cover. Carl's mega particle cannon hit the Zanzibar's bow directly. Though it didn't sink the ship, it definitely inflicted significant damage.

Losing the ship meant losing all mobile suits. Mobile suits without a place to return were no different from coffins. A signal flare for retreat was launched from the Zanzibar, and the enemy mobile suit units returned.

They managed to keep the enemy battleship at bay. Carl thought, they had bought Audrey some time.

November 0087
Izmir

Captain Schröder's announcement came over the ship-wide broadcast. The Titans' General Staff had ordered all soldiers at Confeito to move to the Gate of Zedan, leading the Aswan and Izmir to depart from Confeito as well.

"Do you hear?" Carl asked Eliard. "It seems the peace faction within the Federation Forces intended to hand over Confeito to the AEUG, along with all our experimental data."

"Why would they do something like that?"

"They can't stand the fact that the Titans were developing Gundams."

Eliard turned around when his name was called, to see Audrey smiling at him. Seeing her safe and sound, Eliard felt a deep sense of relief wash over him.

July 0088
Purge

The situation was clear: time was of the essence. If the upcoming trial failed to produce any tangible results, even Commodore Milkov, the presiding judge, wouldn't remain silent.

Eliard's trial was taking much longer than usual. Military tribunals typically reach conclusions mercilessly fast, primarily because the guilt of the accused is often clear. And the military's regulations are inherently merciless.

However, Conrad couldn't overlook this particular case. Eliard's charges were clearly false, and he couldn't allow him to be sent to the gallows unjustly. Eliard had been caught up in the power struggle between the Titans and the main force of the Earth Federation Forces, targeted for elimination merely for being inconvenient to the military.

Everyone understood the lack of time. Joanna, Hendrick, Carl, Audrey—none of them even thought of sleeping. They were all searching for Gabriel Zola, but so far, there were no leads.

“Had he gone to Axis?”

Conrad pondered. If that was the case, there was nothing Conrad could do now.

Somehow, without Gabriel Zola's testimony, he had to think of a way to get through the next trial. There were many options, but none were decisive. They were not strategies to prove Eliard's innocence but merely means to delay the trial.

While Conrad and Joanna had to report to the legal office, Joanna continued to make calls from the office, gathering information about Gabriel Zola.

Joanna entered Conrad's office with a puzzled look.

"What's happened?"

"I received a call from Kirishima before dawn."

"And...?"

"He says he's being pursued by the military. He believes he'll be killed if captured."

Conrad thought for a moment.

"Where is he now?"

"He didn't say exactly, but there's no doubt he's somewhere in New Carson."

"Let's arrange to pick him up."

Joanna looked surprised.

"Are you suggesting we hide him somewhere?"

"My house would be best. We're already providing for three, so adding one more won't make much difference. Besides, Kirishima seems like a reliable man, doesn't he?"

"I admit he's determined."

"Then he might be of help for Eliard's trial going forward."

"But Kirishima is being pursued by the military. And you're suggesting bringing him to a major's home inside the base..."

"It's the most unexpected place. No one would think to look for Kirishima inside the base."

"Can we get through the gate?"

"I'll prepare the documents. You'll deliver them directly to the gate officer."

"Understood."

It was a risk, but Kirishima was in danger. They had to do something. Joanna quickly made contact with Kirishima and seemed to have arranged a meeting place.

Conrad returned to his work, preparing for the next trial. The uphill battle continued, but the situation was gradually changing. The article Kirishima wrote and Michael Chan published was undoubtedly contributing to that change.

It was a race against time, Conrad thought.

Returning home, Conrad found Audrey, Carl, and Hendrick intently watching the TV. Curious, Conrad asked, "What are you all watching?"

"We've been hit," Hendrick replied.

"Hit?" Conrad echoed, seeking clarification.

"Michael Chan is dead," Hendrick revealed.

Conrad stared at Hendrick, digesting the news.

"Cause of death?"

"The news says it was an accident, but that can't be right. He was killed by the military," Hendrick asserted.

A surge of anger welled up inside Conrad, which he barely managed to suppress. Is this what the Earth Federation Forces I belong to have become? he thought. While the military outwardly appears gallant and honorable, a step behind reveals a world rife with conspiracy and power struggles. Conrad was aware of this, but the elimination of a troublesome journalist seemed like outright tyranny. Had the Earth Federation Forces become so corrupt?

"Michael Chan's newspaper has been banned," Carl added. "Probably because it contained another article the Earth Federation Forces didn't like."

"That sounds about right."

"It feels like we're being increasingly cornered. What's the real situation?"

"We must do everything within our power. That's all I can say right now," Conrad responded, though Carl seemed unimpressed by the reassurance.

"And Gabriel Zola's whereabouts?"

Carl shook his head. "No leads. I've even asked acquaintances in the Colony Public Corporation, but tracking down former Zeon remnants is difficult. Some are constantly moving between colonies, and even the Earth Federation government's offices can't keep up with such movements."

"No significant information from King George's connections either," Hendrick added. "If King George's network hasn't caught anything, Zola might not even be in this world anymore..."

"Dead, you mean..."

"As long as we're in space, King George should find some clue..."

"Keep looking. We must find him at any cost."

"Yes..." Hendrick replied weakly. "I understand."

Audrey then asked, "Where's Joanna?"

"She's gone to pick up Kirishima."

"Kirishima's coming here?"

"He's being pursued by the military, so we decided to shelter him here."

Carl smirked. "To the EFF, that's probably the worst joke."

"I think so too."

About thirty minutes later, Joanna arrived at Conrad's house with Kirishima. Conrad was taken aback by Kirishima's appearance; his clothes were muddy and torn, and his hair seemed caked with dirt.

It had been a long time since Conrad had seen someone so exhausted. It reminded him of the soldiers he had seen aboard battleships during intense combat.

"I'm sorry," Kirishima, looking ready to collapse, apologized to Conrad. "I know it's an inconvenience, but I had nowhere else to turn..."

"Don't worry about it. We'll need you to work too."

Anger flared in Kirishima's eyes.

"I'll do what I can. But all I can do is write articles. Without being able to publish them, I'm powerless."

"Are you talking about Michael Chan?"

Kirishima fixed Conrad with a determined gaze.

"He was a true journalist, despite his appearance and usual demeanor."

"I know."

"I wrote an article about being pursued by military vehicles and helicopters, and the ensuing chase that led to the highway accident. That article was likely in the banned newspaper. Michael Chan kept his promise to publish my article, despite the risks."

Conrad nodded.

"True courage is rare for us to encounter."

"Suppressing speech with violence, killing those who displease them. When did the Earth Federation Forces become such an organization?"

"I've been asking myself the same thing. We must win Eliard Hunter's trial to avenge Michael Chan's death."

"There's much to do, and time is limited," Hendrick noted. "Let's get to work."

"But first, dinner," Audrey suggested. "Joanna and I will cook something."

Conrad told Kirishima, "You need a shower first. And then, get some sleep."

"Thank you," Kirishima responded. "But I'll eat before I sleep."

After showering and devouring a dinner of Pot-au-feu, brimming with sausage and vegetables, Kirishima seemed to finally feel human again. With his energy and curiosity restored, he asked Conrad about the future of the trial.

Sipping his post-dinner coffee, Conrad responded, "The situation isn't exactly in our favor. We lack decisive evidence and testimonies. Currently, we're dedicating all our efforts to find a certain individual."

"Oh? Who might that be?"

"Someone from the remnants of the Zeon forces, who, according to information, was with AEUG during the last war."

"From Zeon remnants to AEUG, you say? And this person holds the key?"

"The charge against Eliard, his last and most serious one, involves him allegedly destroying a new weapon. It's highly likely that this person was close to Eliard at the time."

"Saw the whole thing..."

"It's a plausible scenario."

"But..." Hendrick interjected, "This Gabriel Zola guy is nowhere to be found in space. We've searched colonies, Luna... everywhere..."

Kirishima stared at Hendrick with a peculiar expression.

"What did you just say?"

"Did I say something strange?" Hendrick asked back, clearly puzzled.

"The name. That Zeon remnant's..."

"Gabriel Zola, but..."

"I heard that name yesterday."

"Where did you hear it?"

"At a church. A homeless person there said he knew where to find him."

Unconsciously, Conrad leaned forward, intrigued by this new lead.

July 0088
Discovery

"What's the name of that homeless man?" Conrad asked, trying to contain his excitement. It was too early to celebrate.

"He said his name was Joey," Kirishima responded, and Carl was already on his feet.

"Let's go meet him right away."

Conrad cautioned Carl, "It's dangerous for you guys to go out from here."

"I'll go. I know what he looks like, and he said he'd be waiting for me," Kirishima offered.

Conrad shook his head. "Have you forgotten what happened on your way here?"

Carl, visibly frustrated, demanded, "Then what do we do?"

"Joanna and I will go. He's at the church, right?"

"Yes, I met him at the church's shelter. He said he had nowhere else to go."

"We'll leave immediately. Rest while we're gone," Conrad directed.

The night was deep, and leaving the gate at this hour could arouse suspicion from the security personnel, possibly alerting the forces trying to thwart Conrad's defense within the Earth Federation Forces.

But it was time to act.

"Going out at this hour?" Sure enough, the security personnel peered suspiciously into the car, particularly noticing Joanna in the passenger seat, possibly entertaining some indecent assumptions.

"We thought we'd catch a late show at the cinema," Conrad improvised, letting them believe he was out on a date with a beautiful subordinate.

The gate opened, and Conrad drove through.

"This might start some strange rumors about you and me. I might be causing you trouble."

"It doesn't matter. Compared to Lieutenant Eliard Hunter's life, it's a trivial concern," Joanna said, her words bringing comfort to Conrad.

Upon visiting the church, they were immediately greeted by the priest. Upon revealing their identities, the priest's expression hardened.

"This is God's house. No one is allowed to harm those seeking refuge here," the priest declared.

"We're not here for that, Father," Conrad explained their need to speak with Joey, a man with information crucial for defending an innocent young lieutenant facing a military tribunal.

"A military lawyer...?" Still wary, the priest requested to see Conrad's identification.

Conrad complied, and after scrutinizing the ID, the priest seemed to relax.

"I apologize for doubting you. Just the other day, soldiers came here chasing a man..."

"That man is now safe, so you can rest assured," Conrad reassured him.

The priest looked surprised. "Does the chase by the soldiers have anything to do with this young lieutenant's trial?"

"I can't discuss the details," Conrad replied, and the priest nodded thoughtfully.

"You wish to speak with Joey?"

"Yes, we need to hear what he has to say."

"Wait in the sanctuary. If you approached him directly, he might become alarmed," the priest suggested, and soon returned with a man whose long hair and beard suggested he hadn't seen a barber in quite some time.

"Joey, right?" Conrad addressed him.

"You're a military lawyer from the Earth Federation Forces? Are you for real?"

"You mentioned to Kirishima that you know Gabriel Zola's whereabouts. Is that true?"

Joey immediately became cautious. "What if I do know?"

"We'd like you to tell us."

"It won't be easy to share. Kirishima said he'd pay for the information. It could be worth some money."

"I'll pay in Kirishima's stead," Conrad offered, but Joey was not easily swayed by mere words.

"Talk is cheap. I can't just give away information without getting something in return."

"Okay, understood. How much for Zola's location?" Conrad pulled out his wallet, offering a sum that should suffice for the information.

Joey reached out, but Conrad quickly retracted his hand. "I'll pay once I know the information is trustworthy. Where did you meet Gabriel Zola?"

"I was with him on the Zanzibar," Joey revealed, surprising Conrad.

"Is Zola alive?"

"He's alive."

"Tell us where he is. We need his help."

"You're defending a Titans pilot, right?"

"That's correct."

"And you genuinely want to help him?"

"I do."

"Why would a soldier of the Earth Federation Forces care?"

"Lieutenant Eliard Hunter fought following orders. There's no reason for him to be executed. He fought with pride, just like you."

Joey remained silent for a while, pondering. Finally, he disclosed, "Gabriel Zola was working on a construction site, piloting a work mobile suit. Last I saw him, he was in Las Vegas, working on a hotel renovation."

"On Earth, then..." That explained why he hadn't been caught by colony or King George's networks. "When was this?"

"About a month ago."

Conrad turned to Joanna. "A month... He might have already left the construction site by now."

"Nevertheless, it's a solid lead. We could trace his whereabouts through the construction company," Joanna suggested.

"No need for that," Joey interjected, holding a piece of paper between his fingers. "Here's Gabriel's cell phone number."

Conrad was speechless, staring at Joey as he offered the paper. Joanna took it, verifying the number written on it.

"Now it's your turn," Joey said, and Conrad handed over the money, but Joey hesitated to take it.

"What's wrong?" Conrad asked. "Isn't this the agreed amount?"

Joey shook his head. "I don't want the money."

"Why not?"

"I've changed my mind. Just tell Gabriel I said hello."

"You've given us valuable information. You have every right to be compensated."

"It's fine. Find Gabriel and save that Titans pilot."

Joey turned to leave the church. Joanna remarked, "The pride of a Zeon soldier."

Joey looked back, smiling sadly. "I was close to tarnishing it."

So that was it. Conrad understood.

"We won't let those who fought with their lives be forsaken," Conrad affirmed. "Whether they're from the Earth Federation Forces, the Titans, or the Zeon army..."

"Gabriel wanted to return to space. Catch him before he leaves Earth."

With that, Joey left.

Inside the car, Joanna continuously attempted to make calls on her cell phone, to no avail. It seemed unlikely that Joey would have given them a false number.

"The cell phone might be turned off, or perhaps he's in an area with no signal," Joanna suggested.

"We must find Gabriel Zola no matter what. There's a trial tomorrow. I'll try to buy as much time as possible, so please dedicate all efforts to finding Zola," Conrad directed.

"Understood," Joanna acknowledged.

Upon returning home, Carl immediately inquired, "How did it go?"

Audrey and Hendrick also looked on with a mix of hope and anxiety.

"We learned that Gabriel Zola was working at a construction site in Las Vegas. We've got his cell phone number," Conrad revealed.

Hendrick exclaimed, "That's surprising... I didn't expect him to be on Earth."

"I've been trying the number, but can't get through," Joanna added.

"Maybe we should just head to Las Vegas? It's not too far from here," Hendrick proposed.

"We want to avoid a wasted trip," Conrad countered. "This is a race against time."

"Is the verdict going to be that soon?" Carl asked.

"Most likely, Comodore Milkov, the presiding judge, wants to issue a verdict by tomorrow," Conrad speculated.

"What's our plan?"

"If necessary, we can appeal for a public trial," Conrad mentioned.

"The Earth Federation Forces would want to avoid a public trial at all costs..."

"We have no choice but to delay by any means necessary."

Noticing Kirishima's absence, Conrad inquired, "Where's Kirishima?"

"He's resting upstairs. He needs sleep above all," Carl informed.

"That goes for all of you as well. Let's get some rest for tomorrow."

"I can't think of sleep right now," Hendrick declared. "There's too much to do. If we can identify the company that contracted the Las Vegas construction work, we could inquire about Zola."

Joanna nodded. "Of course, I intend to look into it."

"Let's get started then," Hendrick suggested, and they all returned to their computers. Conrad realized everyone understood the gravity of the situation. Gabriel Zola was key to the trial's outcome. Without finding him, saving Eliard would be impossible.

CHAPTER.07

January 0088
Zanzibar, Near the Gate of Zedan

From the bridge of the Zanzibar, Gabriel Zola gazed out at the imposing Gate of Zedan.

"So this fortress became the final battleground in the One Year War..." he mused.

In the captain's chair, Kazak Larson replied, "Solomon, and then A Baoa Qu. Have we just been chasing the specters of the past this whole time?"

"No, this is reality. Look there - it's Axis. Haman is really going for it."

Negotiations between the Titans and Axis had broken down. Now, Haman Karn was on the verge of ramming Axis straight into what the Titans called the Gate of Zedan - the remnants of A Baoa Qu.

"The Titans' ships will come fleeing out," said Zola. "That's when we strike."

A cold smirk crossed Larson's face. "You know what the AEUG main force is calling this operation? Whack-a-Mole. Lying in wait to ambush an enemy in full retreat... doesn't sit right with me."

"Well, the enemy's desperate too. It won't be that easy."

"In the end, the AEUG had to rely on Axis to make this happen. But neither the AEUG nor Axis are where we belong in the long run. This war won't last forever. Where the hell are we supposed to go after this?"

Zola smiled wryly. "There's no guarantee we'll even live to see the end of the war, Kazak. Surviving is the first priority."

"You've got that right..."

"Find that mobile suit team with the Gundam. They should be on the Aswan or Izmir. I'm going to shoot down the enemy Gundam myself. That's all I've got to keep me going now."

"Must be nice, finding yourself a new purpose."

"It's the only way to stay alive."

With a heavy sigh, Larson said, "The Gundam that Gryps created... that's what started this whole war. In more ways than one, the Gundams are tied to everything that's happening."

Zola nodded in agreement.

"The Gundams have to be a symbol. For the Earth Federation Forces, and for us..."

January 0088
Izmir, Gate of Zedan

Eliard waited at the ready in the Izmir's mobile suit deck, having already depressurized for combat. He could launch at a moment's notice.

But the Izmir was still docked inside the Gate of Zedan's port, awaiting the Aswan's preparations for departure. The Aswan, having recently transferred from the Confeito detachment, always operated in tandem with the Izmir.

The Alexandria-class Aswan was a ship capable of carrying out missions solo. Yet the Izmir accompanied it like an escort vessel.

Eliard and the other test team members were not privy to the reason why. But it was clear the Aswan harbored some secret. Of course, he had no objections to protecting that secret, nor to defending his former post on the Aswan.

The voices of the controllers filtered into the cockpit.

"Orders are for ships to depart as soon as they're ready."

"The enemy's waiting out there. Better not to launch piecemeal."

"Have all ships exit while maintaining battle formation. Watch for enemy movements."

Eliard listened to his own pounding heart. He still hadn't gotten used to the tension before a battle. The wait before sortieing was always the hardest part.

Executive Officer Hammond addressed them over the general comms.

"We're setting out. All hands, prepare for enemy attack. Mobile suit teams, deploy immediately upon exiting the port."

"Roger."

Eliard responded.

The Izmir departed, entering a combat zone the instant it reached open space.

"Murphy unit, Gaplant Hrairoo launching," came Commander Murphy's voice over the monitor.

Eliard followed up without delay. "Eliard Hunter, Gaplant Hrairoo Unit 2, taking off."

Next was Carl's Hazel Owsla, with Audrey's Hrududu bringing up the rear.

"The Aswan is exiting the port," Hammond reported. "Don't let the enemy get close."

"Roger that," Murphy replied.

Hrairoo Units 1 and 2 and the Hazel Owsla fanned out horizontally to blockade the port entrance. The Hrududu hung further back near the Izmir.

Audrey had a big role to play - providing rear support and reconnaissance.

As soon as the Aswan safely emerged, its own mobile suit forces launched as well, two squads' worth.

The Aswan and Izmir matched trajectories to rendezvous. Eliard's test team shifted to defensive positions around the Izmir.

"We've got trouble," Audrey announced. "AEUG Zanzibar incoming. That tricked-out Rick Dias'll be deploying."

"Leave it to me," Carl responded. "I won't lose a dogfight."

That particular Zanzibar had it out for their test team. Or rather, the pilot Gabriel Zola was obsessed with Gundams to an abnormal degree.

If so, he'd definitely target Carl's unit. Carl was well aware of this. Eliard's machine might end up in the crosshairs too. The Hrairoo was basically a Gaplant, but Unit 2 that Eliard piloted sported a Gundam-type head. In other words, it could pass for a Gundam.

"Here they come," Audrey reported. "Three mobile suits from the Zanzibar. One heavily armed Rick Dias and two Nemos."

"Disperse," came Murphy's order. In that instant, Eliard kicked in the side thrusters, the powerful G-forces hitting like a gut punch.

The Nemos opened fire with beam rifles at long range. They wielded devices resembling shields, but apparently doubled as long-distance armaments.

"Just a scare tactic," Murphy said. "Get in close and they're nothing special."

True to his words, Murphy was gunning his thrusters to force a melee. Eliard followed his lead.

In a dogfight, the Hrairoo's prowess really shone. The Nemos were no match speedwise. Murphy swiftly shot one down.

Eliard managed to destroy the shield of a Nemo trying to gain distance.

Carl engaged the Rick Dias in a dogfight, with Murphy assisting. The Rick Dias struggled against the highly mobile Hazel Owsla and Hrairoo.

Eliard sought to pursue the remaining Nemo. Thanks to Audrey's covering fire, the enemy had no chance to counterattack.

Eventually, the Rick Dias and one Nemo retreated towards the Zanzibar.

"We'll break through the enemy encirclement," Executive Officer Hammond signaled. "Mobile suits, return to ship. Provide barrage fire."

"Roger," Murphy responded. "Murphy squad, returning to ship."

January 0088
Aswan

The Aswan, together with the Izmir, somehow managed to break through the enemy's encirclement.

Hendrick Ness and Pete were summoned to a cordoned-off section of the mobile suit deck. That area had been sealed off ever since they left Confeito, accessible only to the engineering officers.

One of the engineers spoke. "As you've likely surmised, the cargo loaded at Confeito is a new weapon with a highest security classification."

Hendrick and Pete couldn't help but exchange glances.

"What's with all the ceremony?" Hendrik thought to himself. "This ship already has a test squadron. A new weapon is hardly anything special at this point."

"Right this way..."

The engineer gestured. Hendrick and Pete followed him towards the sealed-off area. Upon seeing the mobile suit being assembled there, Hendrick's jaw dropped in astonishment.

The engineer announced, "This is the TR-6."

February 0088
Izmir

Executive Officer Enrique Hammond stared at the ice-cold, expressionless face of Captain Thomas Schröder, who now gripped the mic for a shipwide broadcast.

"In the wake of His Excellency Jamitov Hymem's passing, and now with Captain Bask Om's death in battle, we must steel ourselves all the more. The AEUG has stolen the colony laser from Axis, revealing their true colors as a terrorist organization. For the safety and security of the Earth Sphere, we Titans must reclaim the colony laser and annihilate the AEUG terrorist group. The fate of the Earth Sphere hinges on this battle. All hands, take this to heart. That is all."

As he set down the mic, Captain Schröder muttered under his breath.

"I wonder how many are taking this seriously."

Hammond was gauging the bridge crew's reactions. Everyone pretended as if they hadn't heard those last words.

"They're all taking the captain's message to heart."

Schröder fixed Hammond with an intense stare, making him ill at ease. He felt as if he was being scolded.

"Indeed. We must win this battle. If we lose here, the Titans will utterly collapse."

"It's best not to say such things..."

"No matter. Everyone must be thinking it. An army rife with internal strife can't hope to wage war."

At a loss for a reply, Hammond remained silent. The captain changed the subject.

"Who will be test piloting the TR-6?"

"Lieutenant Eliard Hunter, sir."

"Not Commander Murphy?"

"Murphy recommended Lieutenant Hunter for the role."

"Is he planning to pass the torch?"

"He may well be. Lieutenant Hunter has already been training on the TR-6 simulator. He even lodged a complaint with the mechanics that the specs were so incredible, the simulator settings must be wrong."

"This ship must protect the TR-6-carrying Aswan."

In other words, act as a shield if necessary, Hammond understood.

"I'm well aware, sir."

"There's a briefing now, correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"Tell the mobile suit pilots this: Do not die, no matter what. If there's even a sliver of a chance, they are to strive to survive."

"Understood."

February 0088
Zanzibar

"Come about! Don't show our flank to the enemy!" Kazak Larson barked.

The Titans had launched their operation to reclaim the colony laser. The fleets of the AEUG, Titans, and Axis were already embroiled in a three-way naval battle.

It was only a matter of time before the mobile suits of each faction engaged. Gabriel Zola addressed the recon team.

"Can you locate the Aswan and Izmir? They'll definitely be together."

From the captain's chair, Larson said to Zola, "Still fixated on the Gundam, I see."

"It's the only reason I have left to fight."

"I know. Leave the colony laser to Char Aznable on the Argama. As soon as we find the Aswan and Izmir, I'll have the ship head that way."

"I'll be on standby in the mobile suit deck. The mobile suit battle will start any moment."

Larson cracked a smile. "Who are you telling? I'm well aware of how war works."

"I'd rather not have the ship sunk before I can bury the Gundam with my own hands..."

Zola exited the bridge.

February 0088
Near the Colony Laser

Eliard was experiencing his first ever fleet battle. The scope of the battlefield was on a whole other level compared to before.

To his right, he could see Commander Murphy's Gaplant Hrairoo Unit 1. Beyond that was Carl's Gundam TR-1 Hazel Owsla. To the left of Eliard's Hrairoo Unit 2 was Audrey's Hrududu.

"Don't get too far ahead," came Murphy's voice. "You'll get hit by friendly ships."

"The frontlines keep shifting," Eliard remarked. "This three-way battle is a real mess..."

"So basically, we just gotta take out both the AEUG and Axis, right?" Carl chimed in. "Let's hurry up and get that colony laser back."

"That's the gist of it," Murphy said.

Eliard always found Carl's optimism reassuring. Everyone knew this would be a tough fight. But Carl's words definitely lifted Eliard's spirits somewhat.

The test team had been incorporated into the very front lines. This was an all-out war for the Titans. Eliard and company didn't know much about this Paptimus Scirocco who now held the reins of power. Nor did they need to. He was someone far above their paygrade anyway.

Eliard would follow the orders of his squad leader. The squad leader obeyed the captain and XO. The captain took orders from HQ. Carrying out commands, defeating the enemy, and surviving - that's all he could focus on. It was plenty.

"Here they come again," Audrey reported. "It's the Zanzibar."

"Persistent bunch," Carl grumbled. "They're targeting my Owsla again. Gabriel Zola is a Gundam stalker."

"Protect the Izmir and Aswan," Murphy instructed. "If we lose our nest, we're as good as dead."

Audrey's voice rang out once more.

"Mobile suits, three signatures. One Rick Dias and two Nemos. They've got those shield-type weapons."

"Spread out," Murphy ordered. "Audrey, fall back and provide cover fire."

"Roger." Eliard and the others responded in unison.

Both Hrairoo Units 1 and 2 were in mobile armor mode. They'd maintain this mode until the last possible second before entering the dogfight. That was how to properly utilize a Gaplant.

As expected, Gabriel Zola's Rick Dias pounced on Carl's Hazel Owsla. Carl was bringing out the full potential of the Owsla's specs.

He deftly exploited the Rick Dias' lack of agility due to its excessive add-on parts. Eliard tried to get behind one of the Nemos, leveraging the Hrairoo's mobility. The G-forces were intense, nearly causing him to black out for a second. The Hrairoo's acceleration was practically lethal.

The Nemo reacted skillfully. But the difference in maneuverability was overwhelming. Eliard transformed Hrairoo Unit 2 into mobile suit mode and unleashed a barrage from his rifle.

The Nemo's pilot was a seasoned fighter too, moving as if anticipating the shots. But Eliard had the upper hand. He locked onto the Nemo in an instant.

At that moment, an impact struck his unit.

"What the..."

Eliard scanned his monitors. For a second, he couldn't comprehend what happened.

"You bastard!" Carl shouted. "I'm your opponent, remember?"

Those words made it click. The Rick Dias he assumed was chasing Carl had fired its beam rifle at Eliard to save its ally.

Must've been that shield-like weapon.

The monitors displayed the damaged area. His right leg had been hit. He could still manage like this.

Eliard decided to team up with Carl to finish off the Rick Dias. As if expecting that, the Rick Dias gunned its thrusters.

"So fast..."

For an instant, Eliard lost sight of it on his monitors.

Right then, he felt another impact, more intense than before.

Did it get me?

Eliard checked his monitors. Several panels had gone dark.

The radio chatter grew distant. Possibly due to Minovsky particles. Or maybe from the damage...

He fired his thrusters but got no response. He was a sitting duck like this. Fear gripped Eliard's pounding heart.

"Damn it. The generator output is dropping too..."

Seeing the gauges on his monitor, Lieutenant Eliard Hunter gritted his teeth.

His cherished Gaplant Hrairoo had taken hits, draining the energy for the beam cannons on its Active Thruster Units attached to both arms. It was in no condition to keep fighting.

Parts of his monitors had gone black too. Lieutenant Eliard Hunter scanned what screens remained.

"How's the battle going?"

With Minovsky particles scattered at combat density, comms with friendlies stayed cut off. He could only rely on visuals. Beam flashes, fireballs flaring and fading. He couldn't even tell if it was enemy or ally being hit.

It had been twenty days since the AEUG seized control of the colony laser at Gryps 2. Now, a three-way fleet battle raged in this airspace between Eliard's Titans, the AEUG, and Axis. The moon loomed close. Earth glimmered blue in the far distance.

"Guess there's no need to finish it off..."

Seeing the enemy mobile suit that lost both arms to his attack, Gabriel Zola muttered to himself.

It was indeed an exceptional mobile suit. One of those next-gen models, huh? But Gabriel Zola had no interest. He was on this battlefield for one reason - to find the Gundam.

Am I obsessed with the Gundam?

Gabriel Zola questioned himself as he withdrew.

The war over the independence of the Principality of Zeon had been going favorably once. The conflict known as the One Year War. But the deployment of a single mobile suit turned the tides.

The White Devil. That's what Zeon soldiers called it. The White Devil was passed down as legend, eventually becoming a symbol. Zeon's survivors would never forget that mobile suit.

And as long as the Earth Federation kept developing mobile suits bearing that accursed name, Gabriel Zola felt he could never stop fighting.

Swinging his Rick Dias around, Gabriel Zola resumed his pursuit of the Titans' Gundam.

February 0088
Izmir

A jolt rocked the entire ship. Executive Officer Hammond had never felt a shock propagate like that. In his usual unflappable tone, Captain Schröder said, "A direct hit. Probably from a mobile suit that slipped through the flak."

An internal comms report of the damage soon followed.

"Multiple hits on the aft port side. Mobile suit attack. Sealing bulkheads in affected compartments."

"If they get the engines, we'll vaporize in an instant," Captain Schröder declared. "Abandon ship. All hands, evacuate."

Hammond was stunned. Abandoning the vessel seemed far too hasty. He felt the Izmir could still fight.

His skepticism must have shown on his face. Captain Schröder addressed him, "Don't take space lightly. It's a different beast from the oceans of Earth. We can't just wait for a destroyer to come to our aid like at sea. Without life support, humans perish in moments. Ships can be rebuilt, humans can't. Get the entire crew to the shuttles and escape pods, now."

"What will you do, Captain?"

"I'll evacuate as well, once I've confirmed everyone is off."

"Understood."

The instant Hammond replied, a Nemo whizzed past the bridge. Another impact rocked them.

"She'll sink any minute," Captain Schröder said. "All hands, abandon ship. Hurry!"

This man was legendary for never letting a single subordinate die. Now Hammond saw why. He had an ironclad conviction against needless deaths. Survival meant living to fight another day. He believed the officers and crew were the military's true assets.

Hammond threw himself into overseeing the crew's evacuation. He had no idea how much time passed.

"Have the Aswan pick up all the mobile suits," Captain Schröder ordered. "Now then, off you go."

"I'm staying with you, Captain."

"Planning to tarnish my legend, are you? Go on, get out of here."

Those were the last words Hammond heard from the captain. Immediately after he boarded the final escape pod and detached from the ship, the Izmir sank.

February 0088
Aswan

"The Izmir has sunk," one of the bridge crew reported.

Captain Pedersen promptly commanded, "Stay calm. Retrieve the escape pods and shuttles."

"Incoming message from HQ," the comms officer relayed. "To Aswan, from HQ. Prepare to deploy the TR-6."

Captain Pedersen glared at the comms officer in disbelief.

"They want us to deploy a new weapon at this stage?"

"That's the order, sir."

Captain Pedersen groaned.

The Titans, AEUG, and Axis were all taking mounting losses. Both Commodore Jamitov Hymem and Captain Bask Om were dead. The AEUG had seized the colony laser. The outcome was already decided.

Deploying the TR-6 would surely achieve some results. In other words, it would mean incurring even more needless casualties. The desperate throes of defeat.

Besides, the TR-6 was no ordinary mobile suit. It was a symbol bearing the name Gundam. Sending a new Gundam into the fray would undoubtedly sow considerable chaos on the battlefield.

Chaos prolonged conflicts. Even if the Titans gained the upper hand, it would be a fleeting victory. They were no longer the Titans of old, having lost their ideals. An army bereft of ideals had no hope of winning. The battle should be brought to a close as is. The Gundam mustn't be deployed. That was Captain Pedersen's belief. But he couldn't disobey an order from HQ.

"Inform the mechanics in the mobile suit deck. Have the TR-6 ready to launch at any time."

"Roger."

Promptly, another bridge crewman reported, "Two damaged Gaplants coming in to land."

Captain Pedersen inquired, "Gaplants? Who are the pilots?"

"Lieutenant Murphy and Lieutenant JG Hunter."

"Are you certain?"

"Affirmative, sir."

"Recon team, stay alert. Those two are not to die under any circumstances."

"Impressive you made it back alive," the Aswan's deck officer said as he forced open the Gaplant Hrairoo's cockpit. Addressing Eliard, he continued, "We're scrapping the wrecked Gaplant. Risk of a secondary explosion."

Eliard understood it couldn't be helped.

"Where's Commander Murphy?"

"Over there."

Eliard looked where the officer pointed. A bloodied Commander Murphy was being carried away. His injuries looked severe.

"Commander!"

As Eliard tried to approach, Murphy gave him a smile and a thumbs-up.

The deck officer said, "Leave the squad leader's treatment to the specialists. You need to rest too. No telling when you'll get redeployed."

Eliard had no choice but to comply.

For the first time, he became acutely aware of his utter exhaustion.

Just as the mechanic had warned, there was no predicting when new sortie orders would come. So Eliard couldn't rest in the pressurized crew quarters. He took a brief respite floating in a corner of the mobile suit deck.

He recalled the terror of being trapped in his crippled Hrairoo. His heart still raced. His breathing felt labored. He had truly sensed the specter of death looming.

"Eliard, that you?" A familiar voice crackled through his comms.

"Hendrick..."

"You made it back to the Aswan at the perfect time."

"What do you mean?"

"We got word from the bridge. Have the TR-6 prepped to deploy at any moment..."

"Meaning I'm supposed to pilot it?"

"You're the official pilot, after all."

"So, they're rolling that out, huh..."

"That's right. Confeito's ultimate weapon, the Gundam Woundwort EX, is being deployed in live combat."

February 0088
Aswan Mobile Suit Deck

Eliard was shocked to see the injured Commander Murphy appear on the mobile suit deck. He'd assumed Murphy would be strapped to a bed in the med bay. Murphy's face was deathly pale.

"Commander, are you alright?"

"I'm not dying yet. I need to tell you something crucial, as the pilot of the TR-6."

"What is it, sir?"

"The TR-6 must not be deployed in combat."

For a moment, Eliard couldn't process what he'd just heard.

"What do you mean?"

"The battle is already decided. Further losses are meaningless for any side at this point."

"But..."

"When ordered, we have to sortie. But the Titans HQ issuing our orders has practically ceased to exist. It's time to end this fight."

"I don't understand," Eliard said. "What does ending the battle have to do with the TR-6?"

"The TR-6 isn't just another mobile suit. It's a Gundam. As long as space warfare continues, the legend of the Gundam will persist. The mere sight of a Gundam can shift the tides. That's no exaggeration, it's fact. The TR-1 Hazel has proven it time and again. If the TR-6 sorties, the Titans will rally. Naturally, that means dragging out the conflict."

Eliard too sensed how the legend of the Gundam, passed down since the One Year War, still cast its shadow on the battlefield.

"What should I do then?"

As Murphy was about to answer Eliard's question, another voice cut into their conversation.

"That's not the sort of discussion to have without cutting the monitor."

It was Captain Pedersen. Murphy bit back his words. Captain Pedersen continued, "I'm heading to my cabin. Both of you, report there immediately."

They had no choice but to obey Captain Pedersen's order.

Standing at attention in magnetic boots, Captain Pedersen addressed the two before him.

"The Gundam must not be deployed in live combat? That's not for a mobile suit squad leader to say."

Murphy remained silent, still at attention.

Eliard was worried about two things, their disciplinary fates, and the state of Murphy's injuries.

Captain Pedersen's voice rang out.

"That is for HQ to ponder. We must follow their orders."

Murphy said, "I'm well aware of that, sir."

"No, you still don't understand."

Captain Pedersen turned to Eliard.

"Launch in the TR-6. Begin preparations at once."

"Yes, sir."

He had no other reply.

"However, after launch, do not engage the frontlines. Promptly destroy the TR-6 instead. That is your mission."

Eliard stared at Captain Pedersen's face in shock.

"Deciding to scrap a new weapon is not your call to make. I'm ordering it on my authority as captain. Now go."

Eliard finally understood. Captain Pedersen had the same idea as Commander Murphy. No more room for doubt.

"Sir!"

As Eliard turned to exit the captain's cabin, Murphy's body began drifting upwards. He looked spent. The relief of hearing the captain's words must have drained what willpower he'd been running on.

"Medical team," Eliard heard Captain Pedersen calling on the shipboard phone. "Send personnel to the captain's cabin at once. Some presumptuous injured fool overexerted himself and passed out."

"We don't have time to swap the mobile armor outer components," Hendrick Ness said. "Launch in mobile suit mode."

"Roger."

Eliard responded. He wasn't heading into battle. No need for a major loadout. The agility of the mobile suit form would be more practical. Eliard gave no thought to the return trip. If destroying the Gundam was the key to ending this war, he would carry out that mission. If need be, he was prepared to self-destruct along with the Gundam.

"Eliard Hunter. Gundam Woundwort EX, launching!"

Feeling G-forces on the verge of blacking out, Eliard burst into the sea of stars in the TR-6.

February 0088
Near the Colony Laser

Gabriel Zola was on recon a bit removed from the front lines. He could leave the main battlefield to the Argama-centered fleet. He'd already lost interest in the three-way struggle between the AEUG, Titans, and Axis.

In the end, Axis had merely been dragged into an internal Earth Federation power struggle. Zola had no motivation to fight in the first place. When he first joined the AEUG, battling for the sake of Spacenoids held meaning. But he felt no drive to actively participate in the conflict over the colony laser.

As a result, the Gundam itself had come into sharp focus in Zola's mind. Defeating the enemy's Gundam. That singular drive was all that sustained Zola's will to fight now.

"What's this?"

His monitor picked up a silhouette. Its IFF code belonged to the Titans, but it didn't match any existing unit in the database.

"A new model?"

He switched the monitor to maximum magnification. Gabriel Zola felt his blood start to boil.

It was a new Gundam.

The machine was flying in the opposite direction of the front lines. Towards the shoal zone.

"What kind of ploy is this?"

He felt a moment's confusion, but it didn't matter. Now that he'd found a new Gundam, only one course of action remained.

Fight it and destroy it.

Gabriel Zola began tracking the new Gundam as it moved at high speed.

February 0088
Aswan

Having lost his mothership, the Izmir, Carl had been ordered back to the Aswan. He landed the Hazel Owsla on the deck.

"I'm heading right back out as soon as I top off propellant," Carl called out to Hendrick Ness.

"What about Audrey?"

"Dunno. We got separated near the AEUG fleet. No clue where the Commander and Eliard are either."

"Those two made it back to the Aswan. The Commander's in the med bay, wounded. Eliard deployed in the TR-6."

"The TR-6? They sent it into live combat?"

Hendrick floated up to the cockpit.

"About that... seems he broke from the front lines."

"Broke from the lines?"

"Some are calling it desertion in the face of the enemy."

"No way."

"I don't buy it either. But Eliard did head towards the shoal zone for sure."

"Solo?"

"Apparently an enemy mobile suit was tailing him. Minovsky particles are screwing with radar. The optical monitors got a glimpse... looked like a Rick Dias..."

Gabriel Zola, Carl thought. Zola chasing the TR-6 made sense. He was fixated on the Gundam. But Carl couldn't fathom why Eliard had left the battlefield.

A notice came that propellant recharge was complete. Carl said to Hendrick, "I'm going after them."

"Hang on. Orders just came in to equip the Hazel Owsla with new gear."

"I don't care what it is, just hurry."

"Roger."

Carl left the Aswan behind. He'd punched the coordinates Eliard was heading for into the Hazel Owsla's navigation system.

Sensing light behind him, he checked the rear monitor. The Aswan was engulfed in bursts of light. It was under attack.

"Oh no..."

He considered turning back to defend the ship. But he quickly realized it was too late. The Aswan was sinking. Carl gritted his teeth.

February 0088
Near the Colony Laser

Eliard spotted the pursuing machine on his monitor. It was a Rick Dias with thruster units added on like a mobile armor.

"Gabriel Zola, huh..."

It was to be expected. Zola relentlessly chased the Gundam. You could say he was possessed by it.

As long as enemies like him existed, deploying a new Gundam in live combat was not an option, Eliard realized. The legend of the Gundam from the One Year War still lived on today. No, its influence may have even grown. Such was the nature of legends.

Just as Commander Murphy and Captain Pedersen had said, the Gundam's deployment would likely spark new conflicts. Ultimately delaying the war's end and incurring that much more needless damage.

"How convenient," Eliard muttered.

It saved him the trouble of destroying it himself. Zola would definitely engage the Gundam in battle. The Gundam Woundwort EX was fated for destruction even if Eliard did nothing.

Escape never crossed his mind. He was fine sharing the Gundam's fate. That was his mission, he believed.

The shoal zone drew near. Chunks of rock, fragments of warships and mobile suits of varying sizes formed a sprawling mass orbiting the Earth. The perfect space to destroy the Woundwort EX. This would be its eternal grave.

Suddenly, a shot came from somewhere. Eliard thought it was Zola, but no. It was a completely different direction. Eliard scanned his monitors.

An AEUG Salamis Kai and two squads of what seemed to be its Nemo mobile suits, six units total, appeared to his left.

"All the way out here..."

They might be rear support. Getting destroyed by them worked too. But if possible, he needed to be thoroughly wrecked. Taking moderate damage and losing mobility, risking capture by the enemy, had to be avoided at all costs.

Some degree of counterattack was likely necessary to make the enemy get serious.

The Nemo fired its beam rifle again. Eliard shot back.

In that instant, the Woundwort EX's frame reacted. It downed three Nemos in the blink of an eye. Once he locked on and pulled the trigger, it automatically tracked and destroyed enemies.

Moreover, the potent shield cannon of the Woundwort EX pierced the bridge of the Salamis Kai. A devastating blow to the battleship. The three remaining Nemos promptly retreated.

Eliard was stunned by that destructive power. He'd experienced it in simulations, but this was his first taste of it in live combat. Deploying something like this at this stage was out of the question. Eliard was freshly convinced of that.

Gabriel Zola was dumbfounded by the scene unfolding before him. It happened so fast, he couldn't even process what occurred.

"A mobile suit squad and a battleship in an instant..."

He felt his blood boil.

"Now that's a Gundam."

This war might end up being Zola's last. He even felt it would be a fitting end to battle the Earth Federation's new Gundam and die.

Zola aimed his shield cannon at the Gundam as it began moving towards the shoal zone again.

Zola fired. A powerful beam weapon. Eliard reflexively dodged it. The habits of a mobile suit pilot, ingrained in his body before he knew it.

"What am I doing..."

He just had to silently take Zola's attacks. Then his mission would be over. But he realized it wasn't as simple as he'd thought.

He'd steeled his resolve. Yet when push came to shove, quietly going to his death was unbearable. If he was fighting to the death, maybe. But being a mere target and dying was hard to accept.

Zola fired again.

Eliard evaded it once more. Dread slowly constricted his entire body. He was finally grasping the reality of death.

Damn it. He couldn't complete his mission like this. Eliard gritted his teeth.

Zola's Rick Dias was keeping its distance. Wary of a counterattack, Eliard figured. The new Gundam's specs were an unknown to Zola.

Or did he have that much faith in his own firepower...?

"No need for caution. I've got no intention of retaliating. Come on, shoot."

Eliard applied negative G with his thrusters. The Woundwort EX began moving at a constant velocity in space.

"It stopped moving..."

Gabriel Zola maintained his distance while constantly moving, on alert.

"Gundam, what are you plotting?"

He couldn't read the enemy's intentions at all. His current foe was nothing more than a target. But Zola was sure it would lure him in, thinking that, only to launch an inconceivable counterattack.

The enemy was a new weapon. And a Gundam at that.

With no inkling of the enemy's intent, he couldn't act rashly. A careless move might spell his end. But nothing would start with both of them stock-still like this.

For the first time on the battlefield, Zola felt an eerie unease. Time crept by at a crawl.

"Oh, to hell with this. We're getting nowhere."

He locked on with the shield cannon.

"Dodge this if you can."

The cannon fired.

The powerful beam blew off the Gundam's left leg. Still, the Gundam didn't move. The shock of its leg being destroyed sent it into a spin. It made no attempt to control its orientation.

Zola grew even more flustered.

"What is it thinking..."

Destroying the enemy Gundam was now Zola's singular goal. But that glory was earned by fighting and triumphing over the Gundam as a mighty adversary. Burying an unresisting enemy meant nothing to Zola.

"Damn it."

Zola began scanning Titans mobile suit squad frequencies. pretty far from the main battlefield, so Minovsky particle density should be low.

With its leg destroyed, the impact sent the machine spinning. Eliard simply endured the terror. Resolving yourself to death was easier said than done. He had to grit his teeth and wait for the enemy to shoot.

This was tantamount to execution by firing squad.

He wanted to fire his thrusters and flee. It would be far easier to fight to the death. He felt the G-forces from the spin but didn't reach for the control stick.

If he touched the stick to control his orientation, he might immediately flee. Or retaliate out of fear. Eliard held his own body tight and bore it.

Right then, he sensed an incoming transmission.

"Gundam pilot, do you read me?"

Eliard, teeth clenched in dread, couldn't respond right away.

"Who's the pilot?"

Taking a few deep breaths, he finally found his voice.

"Lieutenant Eliard Hunter. Is that you, Gabriel Zola?"

"What are you playing at? Is the new Gundam just a paper tiger?"

"For the honor of the Titans, I'll have you know, this machine surpasses the specs of every mobile suit to date."

"Then why not show me that performance against me?"

"This Woundwort EX will not be deployed in combat. My mission is to feign a sortie and destroy the unit."

Eliard could tell Zola was momentarily at a loss for words. Likely too shocked to speak. After a while, Zola's voice came through.

"Why? For what purpose...?"

"You of all people should know the answer to that."

"Know what?"

"The course of this war is already set. What's the point of deploying a new Gundam here now...? It'll only prolong the battle needlessly and pile up more casualties."

"That's none of my concern. If you want the Gundam destroyed, I'll oblige. So fight me."

"Why can't you see this is a pointless battle?"

"Don't screw with me. What good is a soldier who's forgotten how to fight?"

The Rick Dias's beam weapon fired. Another impact rocked the frame. The left arm this time, it seemed. A new twist joined the spin. Even so, Eliard didn't try to adjust his orientation.

"Still won't fight? Going to silently await death?"

"That's my mission."

"Then die as you wish, along with the Gundam."

The lock-on alert blared in the cockpit. A direct hit was coming. Eliard shut his eyes. Strangely, talking with Gabriel Zola had driven off his fear.

Various events from his life flashed through his mind. Childhood memories with his parents. Grueling training in the officer academy. The pride and joy of enlisting in the Titans. Meeting Commander Murphy, Carl, and Audrey in the test team. And the many battles...

His life was ending. He felt it keenly.

Burying the Gundam. That was Zola's sole reason to live now. All that remained was pressing the trigger.

Simple enough. Just bury the enemy. Something he'd done countless times.

Yet he couldn't bring himself to pull the trigger.

Zola clicked his tongue.

Destruction alone wasn't the goal. Fighting and winning was what mattered.

He disengaged the lock. Then quietly fired his thrusters. Approaching the spinning new Gundam as it twisted.

Soon, Zola's Rick Dias grabbed hold of the Gundam's frame with both hands, halting its rotation. He then opened his own cockpit hatch.

February 0088
Shoal Zone, Near the Colony Laser

Eliard felt an impact on his machine. For a second, he thought he was under attack, but something seemed off. The Woundwort EX had been spinning with a twist, but that rotation had stopped.

Glancing at his monitor, he was shocked. The Rick Dias's head was right up close.

"What the..."

Eliard was perplexed.

Had Gabriel Zola chosen to destroy it physically rather than with weaponry? Either way, the result was the same. If the Woundwort EX was destroyed, Eliard couldn't survive. The time one could last in space in a normal suit was very limited.

Bracing for the impact, Eliard gripped the sides of his seat.

Right then, he saw the Rick Dias's head hatch open. The pilot emerged.

"Do you read me, Lieutenant Eliard Hunter?"

Eliard saw Gabriel Zola's face for the first time. He was speaking through his normal suit helmet's comms.

"What are you planning?"

"I'm not sure myself."

"Not sure? All you have to do is destroy this unit, right?"

"Mere destruction is pointless. Fighting and defeating the Gundam is what matters."

"This Woundwort EX will fight no more."

"You seem to really mean that."

"Of course I do."

Gabriel Zola stood silent by the hatch for a while. Eventually, his voice came through.

"Destroying the Earth Federation's Gundams is the mission I've assigned myself."

"Then carry out that mission."

"And similarly, destroying the Gundam is your duty, correct?"

"What of it?"

"You have an obligation to see the Gundam's complete destruction through."

"That's impossible. If I stay in the Woundwort EX's cockpit, I'll just share its fate."

"Then you won't truly be fulfilling your mission."

"But that is my mission."

"You don't have to die like that, Lieutenant Eliard Hunter. A pilot should die fighting. Now, come out of the cockpit."

"What?"

Eliard couldn't gauge the true intent behind Gabriel Zola's words.

"What are you even saying?"

"Oh, I don't know either. But I feel this is the only way."

"What are you trying to do?"

"The sole method to reconcile the mission I've given myself with your duty. And to put an end to my history of battles."

"How?"

"Come to my cockpit. Together, we will destroy the Gundam."

Eliard was at a loss for words at this shocking proposal.

The next instant, Eliard burst out laughing.

"What's so funny?"

"I don't know either."

Eliard said, "But I can't help laughing."

"Are you mocking me?"

"No, that's not it. What's come over me? I must just be... happy."

"Happy...?"

"Yes. You're trying to save my life and your own pride. You're the first warrior I've met like that in this fruitless three-way war."

"Enough with the sappy talk. Hurry up and decide. Are you doing this or not?"

"Alright. I'll accept your proposal. I'm coming over now."

Eliard opened the Woundwort EX's cockpit hatch. Gently kicking off the frame, he flew to the Rick Dias's hatch.

Gabriel Zola firmly grasped Eliard's arm and pulled him into the Rick Dias's cockpit.

The cockpit was cramped, but Eliard managed to stand beside Gabriel Zola. Through his normal suit helmet, he looked at the mans face. He wanted to etch the visage of this proud pilot into his memory.

"Prepare for some serious G-forces," Zola warned.

"Who are you telling? I'm a Gundam pilot too, you know."

"Hmph."

Settling into his seat, Gabriel Zola fired the Rick Dias's thrusters, putting distance between them and the Woundwort EX.

He lined up the powerful beam weapon's sights on the Woundwort EX. The lock-on marker lit up on the monitor.

Eliard said, "I want it destroyed completely."

Gabriel Zola glanced at Eliard.

"I told you, this isn't a one-man job."

Eliard couldn't help but meet Zola's gaze.

"This is the trigger. Go on, put your finger there."

Though skeptical, Eliard did as told. Gabriel Zola placed his hand over Eliard's. Their fingers overlapped on the trigger button.

"Fulfilling my mission and your duty. Here we go."

Eliard felt the force of Gabriel Zola's finger. At the same time, Eliard also applied pressure, pushing the trigger button. The beam lanced straight towards the Woundwort EX.

A direct hit.

The Woundwort EX was utterly destroyed.

Removing his hand, Gabriel Zola said, "With this, the history of my battles with the Gundam comes to a close as well..."

Right then, a familiar voice crackled through the comms.

"Eliard!"

It was Carl.

"Damn you, Rick Dias. You killed Eliard..."

Carl was mistaken.

As Eliard tried to call out, an intense beam fired from the huge weapon equipped to Carl's Hazel Owsla.

Gabriel Zola barely dodged it by firing his thrusters.

"Carl, you've got it wrong!"

Eliard shouted desperately.

"Eliard, is that you? You're alive? Where are you?"

"I'm inside the Rick Dias's cockpit. I came here under secret orders from Captain Pedersen and Commander Murphy."

"Secret orders? What do you mean?"

"To destroy the Woundwort EX."

"What?"

Carl's baffled voice came through.

Gabriel Zola said, "Now that your ally is here, you should return to where you belong."

The Rick Dias's cockpit hatch opened again. Eliard stood at the hatch's edge and looked back.

"You saved my life. You have my thanks."

"Forget the thanks. But do treasure that life."

"Good luck in battle..."

Eliard flung himself out into space.

The Rick Dias fired its thrusters and vanished in an instant.

The souped-up Hazel Owsla approached. Eliard was welcomed into its cockpit.

"Who were you talking to?" Carl asked.

"Gabriel Zola. Thanks to him, I carried out Captain Pedersen's secret orders without dying."

"About Captain Pedersen..."

"Did something happen?"

"The Aswan sank."

"What?"

"We've got nowhere to go back to now."

In that moment, a dazzling beam of light pierced the battlefield.

"What is that?!"

Eliard muttered involuntarily. Carl said,

"The colony laser..."

Eliard watched in a daze as countless ships were incinerated by that light. The sphere of light was visible in the distance.

"You said destroying the Woundwort EX was a secret order?"

Carl's voice snapped Eliard back to his senses.

"I was told the Gundam must not be sent to the front lines."

"Huh. I don't get the complicated stuff, but..."

Just then, they picked up an AEUG broadcast repeatedly calling for the Titans' surrender. It was a transmission from a ship called the Argama.

Carl said, "We've got nowhere to go. Guess we'll just die in a ditch at this rate..."

"Gabriel Zola told me to value my life. I don't want to betray those words."

Carl grinned.

"Then we've got no choice but to surrender."

"Let's do that."

"Hey, this Hazel Owsla is a Gundam too. Isn't it bad to surrender with it?"

"You think...?"

"Let's destroy it too."

"But it's your beloved machine."

"It doesn't need to fight anymore either. I'll let it rest in peace."

"If we destroy it, how will we survive?"

"Did you forget? The Hazel Owsla's cockpit doubles as an escape craft."

That's right. In that case, let's destroy the Hazel too. Eliard was loath to just hand this unit over to the AEUG.

The two made their decision.

In February, Universal Century 0088, the three-way Colony Laser Battle between the Titans, AEUG, and Axis came to its end. The battles of Lieutenant Eliard Hunter and Gabriel Zola also came to an end.

July 0088
Court Martial

As the court martial began, Prosecutor Captain John Gordon promptly approached Judge Commodore Milkov. Unwilling to allow any private discussions, Conrad also stepped up to the bench.

Captain Gordon spoke. "Your Honor, the defense protests the defense's stalling tactics. The defense appears to be drawing out this court martial without any justification. We request swift proceedings."

Commodore Milkov nodded deeply. It was clear he too was displeased with Conrad's delaying maneuvers.

Conrad said, "The defense is preparing additional witnesses. We are loath to have a verdict handed down without exhaustive deliberation."

"New witnesses?" Commodore Milkov fixed his gaze on Conrad. "Can they be summoned promptly?"

"No, I believe it will take some time."

"Then it is denied. I concur with the prosecution's desire to proceed swiftly. Following closing arguments, I will render a verdict."

Commodore Milkov might be colluding with Captain Gordon to punish Lieutenant Eliard Hunter. If that was the Earth Federation Forces' intent, it was entirely plausible.

Everyone thought this trial was unwinnable. It seemed a foregone conclusion that it would only yield results reflecting EFF policy.

Conrad felt two of the four charges against Eliard could be dismissed. The issue was the remaining two. Those were not simple, entangled as they were with EFF machinations. He'd known that from the start.

The problem was the Titans' Gundams. The Earth Federation Forces and government wanted to erase the fact that the Titans had developed Gundams. The Gundams developed at Gryps had been captured by the AEUG and then became the basis for new Gundams created by the giant military industries backing the AEUG. At that point, they ceased to be the Titans' Gundams.

The EFF seemed to want to expunge the history of Gundams being produced one after another at Confeito. Behind this, one could glimpse the shadow of giant military corporations like Anaheim Electronics.

The EFF and Earth Federation government could no longer ignore such massive corporate conglomerates. Pretending the Titans' Gundam

development never happened was likely the intent of both the EFF and these military industries.

The Gundam as a symbol still held ample utility for the military and arms manufacturers. To settle the war, the Titans were cast as villains. The military and military industries could not allow the legend of the Gundam to be tainted by association with the evil Titans.

Commodore Milkov might be holding this court martial on those orders. If so, overturning the final charge would border on the impossible.

But Conrad was betting on the sliver of a chance that remained, the sense of justice that should still dwell within Commodore Milkov. Being tasked with officiating a court martial, Commodore Milkov was a legal expert. He should understand the gravity of judging a man.

Even if the military and Earth Federation government's intents were at work behind this court martial, Conrad hoped Milkov would at least follow proper procedure. And so far, while Milkov seemed somewhat partial to the prosecution, he had done nothing improper.

He had to buy time, no matter what.

"Your Honor. The witness we intend to summon next may have witnessed the entirety of the events pertaining to the final charge against Lieutenant Eliard Hunter. It is clear his testimony would provide the most compelling eyewitness account. Refusing to hear him out would mean disregarding extremely crucial evidence."

Commodore Milkov's expression remained stern.

"I'll ask again. Can this witness be summoned immediately?"

"Not immediately, no."

"Then there is no room for argument. The prosecution and defense have exhausted their witnesses. Prosecution, make your closing argument, to be promptly followed by final arguments."

His tone brooked no dissent.

Conrad said, "The defense requires some preparation for final arguments. We request a brief recess."

Captain Gordon spat, "Your Honor. This is a pointless waste of time. We've had enough."

Commodore Milkov silenced Gordon with a raised hand.

"The prosecution likely needs to prepare their final sentencing argument as well. I will grant the defense's request. One hour recess."

Commodore Milkov banged his gavel.

At Conrad's residence, Carl, Audrey, Hendrick, and Kirishima were making every effort to track down Gabriel Zola. They called the construction company he was supposedly working for in Las Vegas and then phoned one potential lead after another.

But reaching Gabriel Zola himself was proving difficult. They kept trying his cell phone to no avail.

Joanna should be striving just as desperately to ascertain Zola's whereabouts at the legal affairs office. Carl tossed his phone aside.

"Damn it. Why can't we find him?"

Hendrick answered, "He's ex-Zeon. They can't help but be cautious."

"But he was with the AEUG. They won."

"After the Gryps War, the Earth Federation Forces have been scrambling to recover lost ground. They're trying to effectively purge both the AEUG and Titans factions to restore real power to the EFF main force and Earth Federation government. Just being ex-AEUG doesn't mean special treatment."

"Politics, huh..."

"Even we've been under constant EFF surveillance. You can imagine the life of a man who held Zeon rank."

Carl suddenly seemed to remember Kirishima's presence and looked his way. Kirishima appeared to notice. Hanging up, he said to Carl,

"What? Is my face that unusual?"

"I was thinking about your article. The military silenced Michael Chang to bury it."

"So?"

"It means that article was enough of a threat to the EFF."

"That was the intent when I wrote it."

"Do you still have it?"

"Saved on this smartphone."

"Let's spread it online."

"The EFF will just delete the site immediately."

"But a few people will see it before then. We blast it from servers all over. If we use servers in colonies with lax military monitoring, we can buy time before they take the sites down."

"Not a bad idea," Audrey chimed in. "Maybe Gabriel Zola will see the article and realize our intent. I'll handle that. Send me the file."

Kirishima and Audrey got to work at once.

Carl picked up his phone and resumed the effort to find Gabriel Zola alongside Hendrick.

Joanna was struggling just as hard at the legal affairs office. How many calls had she made since this morning? The office lines might be tapped by military intelligence. But so far, there was no interference.

As she pondered her options, the phone rang.

"Hello. Lieutenant Pavlova."

A brief silence.

"I'd like to speak to the legal affairs officer handling the defense in Lieutenant Eliard Hunter's court martial."

"May I ask your name?"

"I'd rather not say, as I can't be sure this line is secure."

Joanna sensed this was no prank or protest call. It could be vital information.

"The lead counsel is Commander Conrad Morris. He is currently in session, so I will take your message in his stead."

"And you are?"

"Commander Morris's subordinate. I'm assisting with Lieutenant Hunter's defense."

"I want to speak to Commander Morris directly."

"In that case, please provide a number where he can reach you."

"I'll call again."

"Please wait."

Joanna asked, daring to hope.

"Might you be Mr. Gabriel Zola, by any chance?"

"No. I'll be in touch."

The line went dead.

Was it really not Gabriel Zola? He might have just said "no" to be safe. If it was someone else as he claimed, what business did he have with Conrad? Either way, Joanna knew this matter required discretion.

"The court martial will now resume," Commodore Milkov declared. "Prosecution, your argument..."

Captain Gordon's expression brimmed with the confidence of assured victory. He stood and recited the facts as if confirming what had been stated many times before, ultimately seeking the death penalty for the crimes of desertion in the face of the enemy and unilaterally destroying a new weapon.

If this proceeded to final arguments, Eliard would be found guilty. If he bargained, he could hope for some reduction in sentence.

That was part of a lawyer's job too. But Conrad had no such intention. Eliard was innocent. Without an acquittal, all their efforts would be for naught.

Eliard stared straight ahead, resolute. Glimpsing him out the corner of his eye, Conrad even felt moved. He seemed ready to accept any fate. Conrad was freshly determined that he had to save him, no matter what.

"Defense, your final argument..."

Commodore Milkov spoke.

Conrad rose to his feet. Eliard remained fixated forward as before.

"Your Honor, before my closing, I'd like to request permission to speak on a related matter..."

"Is it directly relevant to this court martial?"

"Yes, sir."

"Permission granted. Be brief..."

Conrad said, "The defense moves to appeal to have this trial open to the public."

He felt Captain Gordon's baleful glare. Commodore Milkov also stared at Conrad in silence for a time.

July 0088
Phone Call

"Submit your appeal in writing," Commodore Milkov instructed.

Conrad retrieved the necessary documents from his briefcase. "I have the paperwork ready."

He delivered it to the presiding officer's bench. Receiving the documents, Commodore Milkov thumbed through them, his expression grave.

As Conrad returned to his seat, Eliard quietly asked, "Can we get a public trial?"

"The system allows for it. It's our only recourse to prevent the sentence from being finalized."

Eventually, Commodore Milkov spoke.

"As it's an appeal, it requires consideration. This session is adjourned."

Though it might be called a stalling tactic, he had no choice but to attempt some resistance. Conrad said to Eliard, "I won't let you be sacrificed to the military and Earth Federation government's schemes. Trust me."

"I do."

"I'll see you again tomorrow."

Eliard exited the courtroom alongside the bailiff.

Now it was a race against time. Conrad gritted his teeth.

Arriving at the legal affairs office, he received Joanna's report.

"A man wishing to speak to me called, you said?"

"Yes. I asked his name, but he wouldn't give it. He seemed extremely cautious."

"It wasn't Gabriel Zola himself?"

"I don't know. But I don't think it was Zola."

"Either way, he said he'd call again? Transfer it to my cell phone the moment it comes in. Set it to forward automatically when you leave the office."

"Understood."

Conrad returned home.

He'd figured the four there would be utterly spent. Futile efforts sap one's strength more than necessary.

But it was the opposite of what he expected. Carl and Hendrick were visibly excited, Audrey's cheeks were flushed, and Kirishima seemed unusually animated.

"What happened?" Conrad asked.

"We found out where Gabriel Zola is," Hendrick replied. "Surprisingly, he was right here in New Carson."

"In New Carson?"

"He turned up at a church's emergency shelter. Apparently, his cell phone battery died and he hadn't been able to charge it. Seems the pastor convinced him to get in touch."

"The pastor did..."

It was rare, but Conrad felt the urge to thank God. He immediately called Joanna and instructed her to head to the church.

"I'll head over right away too."

Hanging up, Carl asked, "You're bringing him here?"

"It's the safest place. Nowhere else in New Carson is secure."

Kirishima nodded. "I've experienced that firsthand."

Carl shrugged. "No matter how big the house is, it'll get cramped."

Despite his words, there was a hint of happiness in his tone. Their allies were gathering. He must be savoring that elation.

"Reminds me of fleet life," Conrad remarked as he left.

As he went to pull his car out of the garage, his cell phone rang. It was Joanna.

"Is there a problem with Zola?"

"No, sir. That man called again. I'm forwarding it."

Conrad waited a moment.

"Are you the one defending Lieutenant Eliard Hunter?"

"I am. Conrad Morris."

"I've been worried about Eliard. And yesterday, I read Kirishima's article online."

"And you are...?"

The man gave his name. Upon hearing it, Conrad stood frozen in shock for a time.

July 0088
Denial

Shortly after the session opened, Commodore Milkov fixed his gaze on Conrad and said, "The defense's appeal for a public trial is denied. The defense's arguments did not present sufficient grounds. Therefore, this tribunal will continue proceedings."

Eliard bit his lip. The sentence would be passed here, finalized after closing arguments. Likely the death penalty. He thought that's how military tribunals worked.

So this is the end for me. As he muttered inwardly, Conrad raised his hand and stood.

"The defense has a new witness to present."

Commodore Milkov's face showed open displeasure. "Is this witness crucial to the outcome of this court martial?"

"Yes, Your Honor."

"Then call the witness..."

Conrad turned to the back of the room. Eliard followed his gaze. Near the entrance stood Conrad's female secretary. She opened the door. Upon seeing the man who appeared, Eliard almost cried out.

His attire was rather shabby. Like a construction worker. But Eliard would never forget that face.

It was Gabriel Zola.

"Witness, take the stand," Commodore Milkov prompted.

Gabriel Zola strode confidently to the front. He spared Eliard a brief sidelong glance, but his eyes betrayed no emotion.

Conrad began his questioning. "In the so-called Gryps War, you fought with the AEUG, correct?"

"Yes."

"Do you recall the battle in February 0088?"

"I remember every sortie I flew."

Commodore Milkov cautioned, "The witness will answer counsel's questions with a yes or no."

"Yes, I remember."

"You were fighting removed from the main engagement near the colony laser. Why is that?"

"I was pursuing the Titans' Gundam. At that time, I spotted a new Titans weapon. I moved away from the front lines to engage it."

"Meaning you were fighting as you moved?"

"Yes. We were in combat."

"Do you know who was piloting this new weapon?"

"Yes, I do. Lieutenant Eliard Hunter."

"Did you converse with Lieutenant Hunter on the battlefield?"

"Yes, I did."

"Lieutenant Hunter was moving not to the front lines, but towards the shoal zone. You were pursuing him. Is that right?"

"That's correct."

"Do you know the reason?"

"Yes. I do."

"Please explain."

"Lieutenant Hunter was under orders from a superior officer. Orders to destroy the new weapon. Lieutenant Hunter was heading for the shoal zone to carry out those orders."

"Objection," said the prosecutor, Captain Gordon. "The witness is stating unprovable claims based on vague recollections."

Commodore Milkov looked towards Captain Gordon. Eliard figured Milkov would rule in favor of the prosecution.

Commodore Milkov stated, "Objection overruled. Defense, continue your questioning."

Eliard was surprised. Commodore Milkov was staring at Gabriel Zola with piqued interest.

Conrad resumed his questions. "Why did this new weapon need to be destroyed?"

"I believe only the officer who gave the order can say for sure, but I can speculate. Because the new weapon was a Gundam. The battle's course was set. Deploying a Gundam at that stage would sow chaos on the battlefield. It risked reigniting a conflict that was winding down. The judgement was likely that it would only increase needless casualties."

"Objection," Captain Gordon spoke up again. "The witness is speculating."

Commodore Milkov said, "Objection sustained. Witness, limit your statements to facts within your knowledge. Counsel, mind the content of your questions."

Conrad was unfazed. "I'll rephrase. As a veteran mobile suit pilot, based on what you saw, if the new weapon Lieutenant Hunter was piloting had been deployed, what would have happened to the state of the Gryps War?"

"The new weapon destroyed three Nemos and a Salamis Kai in an instant. Had it entered the front lines, it undoubtedly would have caused pointless chaos."

Conrad said, "No further questions."

Eliard was surprised Conrad ended his questioning so abruptly.

Commodore Milkov asked, "Does the prosecution wish to cross-examine?"

Captain Gordon stood. He pondered a moment before starting his questions.

"You said you spoke with Lieutenant Hunter on the battlefield. Would radio communication be possible under combat-density Minovsky particle dispersal?"

"Yes, it was possible. Minovsky particle density wasn't too high near the shoal zone."

"Is that conversation recorded anywhere?"

"No, it isn't."

"You called the new weapon a Gundam. Did you confirm that with anyone?"

"Lieutenant Hunter also referred to it as a Gundam."

"But that conversation wasn't recorded, correct?"

"Correct."

"No such new model Gundam existed. You may have simply imagined some mobile suit was a Gundam."

Gabriel Zola raised his head, resolute.

"I'm ex-Zeon. I've pursued nothing but Gundams on the battlefield. I can tell. That was a Gundam. Not some pet name for a machine or a codename. It was the thing itself."

"No further questions," Gordon stated.

Conrad then spoke up.

"I'd like to call one more witness."

His expression seemed brimming with confidence.

July 0088
Victory

A new witness appeared at the entrance. When Eliard saw the person standing there, escorted by Joanna, he leapt to his feet with a silent cry.

Conrad quietly said to Eliard, "Our trump card."

Slowly approaching from the doorway was undoubtedly Commander Wes Murphy. Eliard's eyes met Murphy's. His squad leader gave a slight nod.

Prompted by Commodore Milkov to "begin questioning, Counsel," Conrad started his queries for Murphy, who had taken the witness stand. After basic questions about name and rank, Conrad said,

"I will ask about the Colony Laser Incident, which became the de facto final battle of the Gryps War. Were you fighting on the same battlefield as Lieutenant Eliard Hunter?"

"Yes. We were in the same combat zone."

"Were you always operating alongside Lieutenant Hunter's unit?"

"No. In actual battle, there are times you don't have the luxury of constantly confirming each other's positions. That was the case during the Colony Laser Incident."

"Did you converse with Lieutenant Hunter in that battle?"

"I did."

"When was that?"

"Right after our mothership, the Izmir, was sunk. Lieutenant Hunter and I were taken aboard the Aswan. We spoke then, inside the Aswan."

"Do you remember the content of that conversation?"

"Of course."

"Please share specifics."

"I was wounded and receiving treatment. But I felt I had to go see Lieutenant Hunter, so I slipped out of the med bay."

"Why did you need to see Lieutenant Hunter?"

"I knew there were plans to deploy a new weapon in live combat, and that Lieutenant Hunter was to be its pilot."

"What did you go to tell Lieutenant Hunter?"

"That the new weapon must not enter the front lines. I ordered him to destroy it in secret."

"And Lieutenant Hunter carried out those orders?"

"No. They weren't my orders. Captain Otto Pedersen overheard our conversation via shipboard monitors. Lieutenant Hunter and I were summoned to the captain's cabin and officially given the order."

"Please reiterate the content of that order."

"To destroy the new weapon without deploying it in combat."

The courtroom fell silent. After a lengthy pause, Conrad asked, "What was this new weapon?"

"The TR-6, designed at the Confeito plant. Codename: Woundwort. A new model Gundam."

"Objection!" Captain Gordon protested. "The witness's statements cannot be verified. The Aswan sank in battle. Captain Pedersen was killed in action."

Commander Murphy faced Gordon and said, "Just before I evacuated the Aswan, Captain Pedersen put that order in writing and entrusted it to me. I came here to deliver Captain Pedersen's signed orders."

"Objection!" Captain Gordon cried in anguish. "Only evidence obtained through proper channels is admissible."

Ignoring him, Commodore Milkov asked, "Will the defense submit those orders as evidence?"

"Yes," Conrad replied. "No further questions."

Commodore Milkov asked Gordon, "Does the prosecution have any questions?"

Gordon pondered intently for a time, then said in a resigned tone, "No, Your Honor."

"After a recess, I will pronounce the verdict." Commodore Milkov's gavel rang through the court.

The military tribunal reconvened, and Commodore Milkov began reading the verdict. Each of the four charges against Eliard would receive its judgment.

First, on the charge of involvement in the Colony 30 Incident, Commodore Milkov stated,

"Not guilty. The court accepts the defense's argument that the defendant's rear support duties made his direct participation in the Colony 30 Incident physically impossible."

Next, on violating flight regulations with the Asshimar.

"Not guilty. The court finds that this matter was already addressed through disciplinary action at Khartoum Base, thereby nullifying the present charge."

Then, on desertion in the face of the enemy during the Colony Laser Incident.

"Not guilty. Testimony that the defendant engaged in combat with an AEUG battleship, mobile suits, and witness Gabriel Zola is credible. Therefore, the court rules the defendant's actions do not constitute desertion."

Three acquittals so far. But that was expected, Conrad thought. The final charge was the real issue. Commodore Milkov continued,

"Next, on destroying a new weapon without authorization."

Commodore Milkov stared grimly at the verdict. Conrad felt the rare urge to pray.

"Not guilty."

As that declaration rang out, Conrad clasped his hands tight. Eliard gazed at Commodore Milkov, dazed. He was saved, though the reality of it likely hadn't sunk in yet.

Commodore Milkov went on, "Responsibility for destroying the new weapon lies with the officer who gave the order, Captain Otto Pedersen. Therefore, this court will not hold the defendant accountable. However, while several testimonies referred to the weapon in question as a Gundam, this fact remains unverified and will not be entered into the record. This concludes the proceedings."

The gavel echoed through the chamber.

Conrad rose to his feet. Eliard saluted him. Instead of returning the salute, Conrad embraced Eliard.

July 0088
Departure

"Sorry I'm late," Wes Murphy told Eliard. "After getting wounded then, I was sent to a hospital dirtside. I've been under de facto house arrest ever since. I learned about the trial from a tabloid. I wanted to fly over immediately, but it took time to slip out of the hospital."

Conrad said to Murphy, "If you hadn't come, Eliard likely would've been convicted."

"I heard it was an unwinnable case. Thank you for saving him."

Conrad extended his right hand. Murphy gripped it firmly.

"We're having a party at my place now," Conrad told the two. "You'll see some familiar faces."

Sure enough, the atmosphere that night was uncanny. Like a long-separated family reuniting.

Murphy's whole squad was present. Conrad watched their joy with envy. Squad mates had a special bond. Maybe even stronger than blood ties.

But Conrad knew they would part ways again.

Carl had to return to the Colony Public Corporation, Audrey and Hendrick to Luna. They'd likely remain under EFF surveillance.

Conrad couldn't help but pray this trial's outcome would do something to improve their treatment.

At the very least, he had to find a place for Eliard and Murphy, who were still enlisted...

Using his position in the legal bureau and the connections he'd cultivated in the EFF, he needed to secure them a post. Eliard was still young. And Murphy was a seasoned hero. If they strongly desired it, it wasn't impossible.

Until they rejoined the military, this trial wouldn't truly be over. That's how it felt.

"May I pour you a drink?" Joanna approached Conrad and asked.

"Absolutely. I don't think I've ever felt this good. You did great too. We couldn't have won without you."

"I merely followed your instructions, Commander. You never gave up."

"Look, Kirishima is eying you. Why not keep him company? I'd say he's earned it..."

Joanna smiled and said, "If that's an order..."

Glass in hand, she made her way to Kirishima.

If only this night could last forever... Conrad mused as he watched Murphy's squad and Hendrick.

Eliard received an abrupt summons to headquarters. There, he was handed official personnel orders.

The directive was clear: report immediately to the Earth Federation Forces Officer Academy. Following his orders, Eliard made his way there.

This was the same academy where he had studied alongside Carl. As he stepped onto the familiar grounds, nostalgia washing over him, he spotted two men standing ahead.

He stopped short, momentarily taken aback.

"Commander Murphy..." he said, his voice a mixture of surprise and respect.

Beside Murphy stood Commander Conrad Morris, silent but unmistakable.

Murphy spoke first, his tone direct and steady.

"We've been waiting for you."

"Sir, why are you here?"

"Commander Morris pulled some strings. I've been assigned here as an instructor. And you, you're going to be an instructor too."

Eliard eyes widened, and he turned to Conrad, seeking some hint of explanation.

"Me, an instructor?"

Conrad studied him carefully before asking, "Does this displease you? I understand you're probably still eager to return to active combat. You're at that age where the front lines still call."

Eliard snapped to attention, his heels clicking crisply together.

"No sir, not at all! I'm grateful just to have the opportunity to serve in the military. I... I don't even have the words to express my gratitude."

Murphy's voice grew serious.

"Neo Zeon's activities are intensifying. We have a responsibility to train as many outstanding pilots as possible. There's more work here than you might think."

"Yes, sir!"

Eliard lifted his head and stood tall, shoulders squared with determination.